

## Specifics of Rivalry between Non-Regional Powers

Yang Zitong

**Abstract:** *Since the independence of the five Central Asian states, Russia, the United States, and China, based on their respective strategic considerations and with their respective endowments and grasps, have engaged in a fierce game in Central Asia centered on the arenas of domestic politics, diplomacy, economy, security, and culture. As a country with close historical ties with Central Asian countries, Russia's influence in Central Asia is no longer comparable to what it was historically, but its role in various fields remains strong. As another important neighboring country of Central Asia, China has in recent years shown a more active willingness to cooperate with Central Asian countries and achieved fruitful results. Among them, in the more prominent economic field, China has become Central Asia's largest trading partner, while in the political, security and cultural fields, China's influence is steadily increasing. The United States was actively involved in the transitions of Central Asian countries in the 1990s, and took the opportunity of counter-terrorism cooperation to enter the era of military presence in Central Asia in the early 21st century. However, with the deterioration of its relations with some Central Asian countries, the U.S. strategy in Central Asia has returned to calm. Until recent years, when the geopolitical status of Central Asia in the context of the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan, the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and other international changes once again highlighted, the United States is eager to revitalize its position in Central Asia, thereby counterbalancing the influence of China and Russia.*

**Keywords:** *Central Asia; Russia; China; U.S.; Triangular Game*

### Introduction

After the independence of the five Central Asian states, with the rapid collapse of many of Russia's close historical ties with the Central Asian states, there emerged in the Central Asian states a greater practical need and subjective willingness to cooperate with the rest of the world. For example, at the beginning of the independence of the Central Asian states, the United States and Europe actively projected power in the region and participated in shaping the political systems of some of the Central Asian states. With the outbreak of the 9/11 event in 2001, the U.S. influence in Central Asia was further strengthened, and it began to step into the era of military presence in Central Asia, but it soon shifted to a more low-profile presence due

to the deterioration of relations with the Central Asian countries. In recent years, cooperation between China and Central Asian countries is surging in various fields, especially in the economic sphere, as China and Central Asian are assigning more strategic significance to each other. Against the backdrop of the escalating Russia-Ukraine conflict and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the geopolitical significance of Central Asia has been further emphasized, leading Russia, China and the U.S. to further increase their influence in the region. It can be said that this triangular game, which started after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is now getting more and more intense due to changes in geopolitical conditions. In the following, this paper will analyze and explain the game between China, Russia and the United States in Central Asia in several major fields: domestic politics, diplomacy, economy, security and culture.

### **Domestic politics sphere**

The game played by the great triangle of China, the United States and Russia in Central Asia around the political sphere can be subdivided into two sub-fields: domestic and diplomatic. On the domestic front, while the newly independent Central Asian states were confused about the design of the state systems, the United States led Europe to actively participate in shaping the political and economic systems of some Central Asian states, while Russia utilized its policy instruments and institutional modeling role to substantively steer the political systems of Central Asian states, and China built its relations with Central Asian states on the basis of equality and mutual benefit in accordance with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

Specifically, the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union left the Central Asian countries in great confusion over the choice of paths for political and economic development, and the countries needed to face the dilemma of how to deal with the Soviet legacy and the extent to which they would accept the more unfamiliar neoliberal reform programs. As the victor of the Cold War, the United States, with its unprecedented confidence in its own ideology and institutional design, led its European allies to become

actively involved in the design of the political and economic structures of some Central Asian countries. Using numerous overseas non-governmental organizations, other international organizations, and embassies and consulates abroad, they actively lobbied Western-friendly regimes and provided support for the neoliberal transition of their political and economic systems. Under the Western influence, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan, after the first stage of political transition, have built up a sense of sovereignty and support for political institutions based on new constitutions, legitimate electoral systems, legislatures, political party systems, and civil society. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, meanwhile, were less affected by similar developments due to the high degree of centralization of power and the protracted civil war that spanned almost the entire 1990s, respectively. It is important to note that the U.S. political intent at this stage was to shape the region as a long-term security buffer and potential trade market by promoting the landmark "Greater Central Asia (GCA)" program.

After absorbing the Western ideas of separation of powers and institutions such as direct presidential elections, the Central Asian countries formed political systems with their own characteristics. By the beginning of the 21st century, Central Asian countries had basically established a super-presidential system. The emergence of this situation, in addition to being influenced to a certain extent by the political legacy of the Soviet period, has also been facilitated and shaped to a large extent by contemporary Russia. In addition to the demonstration effect brought about by the Russian polity, Russia has shaped and strengthened Central Asian political institutions through the spread of ideas and norms, the increasing use of economic and cultural power, the minimal but strategic use of hard power, and the development of regional organizations.

In contrast, China, based on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, respects the political systems and road choices of Central Asian countries and develops its relations with them on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. According to the author's interviews with experts and scholars in Central

Asia, this is an important reason why Central Asian countries are happy to cooperate with China. For example, Prof. Ulugbeck Khasanov, Head of the Department of International Relations at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy of Uzbekistan, has said that compared with Europe and the United States, which like to tie a series of conditions behind their aid programs, and Russia, which wants to control Central Asia by various means, Central Asian countries prefer to cooperate with China because the cooperation programs proposed by China do not have the intention of exporting ideology and political control behind them.

### **Diplomatic sphere**

In the diplomatic sphere, the great triangle of China, the United States and Russia has increased its political influence in the region through the international organizations and cooperation mechanisms that each of them leads and participates in, bilateral contacts with the Central Asian countries, as well as high-level visits, special ceremonies and other diplomatic means of enhancing ties with the Central Asian countries.

Firstly, Russia still has the strongest political influence in Central Asia. Although Russia's mobilizing power and influence in Central Asia is not what it used to be, it still holds regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which are capable of exerting significant influence on Central Asian countries, as evidenced by the CSTO's rapid intervention in the January Events of 2022 in Kazakhstan.

After the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Central Asian countries have demonstrated a strong sense of independence and autonomy in their statements on Russia's "special military operation". For example, Kazakhstan has publicly stated that it respects the sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine, does not recognize the independence of the Donbas and Crimea, and has promised not to be a party to help Russia circumvent Western sanctions. Uzbekistan has also expressed concern about the situation in Russia and Ukraine and supports a peaceful

resolution of the Ukrainian crisis. However, Central Asian countries continue to regard relations with Russia as a diplomatic priority, as evidenced by the fact that the presidents of the five Central Asian countries, in the face of Western pressure, traveled to Moscow to participate in the Victory Day military parade, which was a major diplomatic ceremony held on May 9, 2023.

In addition, although the outside world is generally pessimistic about Russia's influence in Central Asia after being trapped in the Ukraine battlefield, the change of the international situation also provides an opportunity for Russia to re-integrate and consolidate its ties with Central Asian countries in some areas. For example, some scholars have pointed out that with the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the relations between Central Asia and Russia have entered a new era, and the impact of the war on Central Asia has proved that the close ties between Russia and Central Asian countries in military, finance, immigration, finance, commodities, oil and gas market, sports, medical care and environmental protection have not weakened. Putin is not only actively strengthening bilateral relations between Russia and individual countries, but is also working to revitalize Russia's multilateral ties with Central Asia.

On the other hand, China has made active use of mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, C5+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative to deepen bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Central Asian countries. First of all, as the first regional international organization founded by China, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an important platform for cooperation between China and Central Asian countries. During the more than 20 years of the SCO's development, China has actively promoted the value and infrastructure construction of the organization, worked hard with Central Asian countries and other partners to create a sound and stable security environment, and vigorously promoted regional practical cooperation and people-to-people exchanges, making significant contributions to the development and growth of the SCO and the building of an SCO community with a shared future. On July 4, 2023, the

23rd meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the SCO was held, to which the five Central Asian States were invited either as member states or as special guests. The summit not only adopted 14 strategic documents, including the statement on countering radicalisation leading to terrorism, separatism and extremism, and a statement on cooperation in the field of digital transformation, but also paid special attention to issues of interest to China and Central Asian countries, such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project, the situation around Afghanistan and its domestic reconstruction.

At the same time, China has also established C5+1 cooperation mechanisms with Central Asia at different levels. On July 16, 2020, for the first time, China held a meeting with the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian countries under the "C5+1" format. In May 2023, China and the five Central Asian countries took the Xi'an Summit as an opportunity to announce the official establishment of the China-Central Asia Heads of State Meeting mechanism, and pledged to give full play to the strategic leading role of heads of state diplomacy and strengthen the top-level design and overall planning for the development of relations between China and Central Asian countries. In the joint statement issued after the meeting, China and Central Asian countries also reaffirmed their mutual understanding and support on issues concerning each other's core interests and pledged to deepen all-round cooperation in political, security, economic, cultural and other fields. This summit marks the opening of a new era and a new chapter in China-Central Asia cooperation.

In addition, the Belt and Road Initiative has injected great momentum into the cooperation between China and Central Asia. China is actively strengthening its harmonization and alignment with the initiatives and national development strategies of the Central Asian states, including the New Economic Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan "Nurly Zhol", the National Development Program of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2026, the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2030, "Revival of the Great Silk Road" of Turkmenistan and the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026, to strengthen

practical cooperation in various fields in order to form a new architectonics of cooperation, characterized by a high level of complementarity and mutual benefit. At the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in October 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed eight actions for China to support the high-quality construction of the Belt and Road, pointing out the priority directions for further cooperation between China and its Belt and Road partners, including Central Asian countries. In addition, China signed a series of cooperation documents with Central Asian countries during the summit, marking a new level of China-Central Asia cooperation under the Belt and Road framework.

U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia has been characterized by distinct phases based on its interests in the region at different times. First of all, as already mentioned above, during the decade of the Central Asian countries' independence, in order to promote the decoupling of Central Asia from Russia and its integration into the U.S.-led international economic and political system, the U.S. led Europe to invest heavily in Central Asia, actively participated in the internal transition and development of the Central Asian countries, and hoped to not only reshape the political and economic systems of Central Asian countries with neo-liberal programs but also actively promoted the development of civil society in these countries in an attempt to cultivate pro-Western liberal values among the populace.

After the 9/11 event in 2001, the center of gravity of U.S. policy in Central Asia shifted significantly. Given the logistical demands of the massive U.S. military operation in Afghanistan and the resulting heavy reliance on military facilities needed to access Central Asia, military and security considerations overshadowed commitments to promote political and economic reforms and human rights as the priority considerations for the U.S. approach to Central Asia. And Central Asia, by virtue of its geopolitical significance, was transformed from a region of peripheral interest to a region of higher priority in the U.S. international geostrategy.

However, due to factors such as U.S. finger-pointing over human rights issues in Central Asian countries, relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the United States deteriorated, and the U.S. military bases in their territories were closed in 2005 and 2014, respectively, ending the era of the U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Subsequently, U.S. Central Asia policy shifted to a regular operation around a few core issues. In 2015, the U.S. Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs released the U.S. Strategy for Central Asia, which was updated in 2019. And in terms of the newer version - U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity, the priorities of U.S. Central Asia policy are gradually focusing on several key areas such as sovereignty of Central Asian states, counterterrorism, Afghanistan, human rights, and investment in development. In addition, also in 2015, John Kerry, then U.S. Secretary of State, used the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly as an opportunity to meet with the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian states, and the U.S.-Central Asia C5+1 mechanism was established. It should be noted that at the beginning of the Trump administration, the United States paid significantly less attention to Central Asia, and at one point drastically cut the financial assistance provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to Central Asia, which has only been gradually restored to the previous level since the Biden administration.

Particularly since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian War in 2022, as Central Asia's geopolitical importance has increased, the United States has revitalized its bilateral and multilateral diplomatic interactions with Central Asian countries in order to counterbalance the influence of China and Russia in the region. For example, at the end of 2022, the USAID/Central Asia's 2020-2025 Regional Development Cooperation Strategy, which involves the United States, Afghanistan, and the five Central Asian countries, was reviewed and re-launched, which explicitly states that its main purpose is to accelerate the development of the region and to support key U.S. strategic objectives in Central Asia, and establishes that the five priority areas are: energy, trade, transboundary water and environmental management, countering violent extremism, and

combating trafficking in persons. In September 2023, the U.S. even elevated its C5+1 summit with Central Asian countries to the head of state level for the first time, by pledging investment assistance and deepening cooperation with Central Asian countries in specific areas in an attempt to weaken their dependence on China and Russia.

### **Security sphere**

In the field of security, Russia is the only country that maintains a military presence in Central Asia and plays an important role in maintaining the security situation in the region. Specifically, Russia is not only the main guarantor of security on Central Asian countries' southern borders, but also a key player in preventing the spread of radicalism in the region, and Central Asian countries need Russian military assistance, joint exercises, and rhetorical support to reduce their sense of threat. On the one hand, Russia has direct military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. For example, the 201st military base in Tajikistan is Russia's largest overseas military base, which was permanently stationed by the 201st Motorized Rifle Division. Prior to the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the base had an estimated 7,500 personnel, which has been reduced by the current redeployment of troops to Ukraine. The Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan is primarily responsible for securing the airspace of the Collective Security Treaty Organization countries, among other things. On the other hand, Russia leads the CSTO, a regional security organization, of which three of the five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are currently members. After nationwide unrest broke out in Kazakhstan in 2022, the CSTO quickly intervened in the country to help quell the unrest, demonstrating the organization's usefulness, albeit at the same time generating a public outcry in Kazakhstan. However, the organization's difficulty in playing a substantial role in the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has greatly damaged its reputation. Nevertheless, Russia has played a role in mediating this conflict through President Putin's personal diplomacy.

As already noted, the U.S. security strategy in Central Asia can also be divided into several phases. From the independence of the Central Asian states until the outbreak

of 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001, U.S. security policy in Central Asia focused on several priorities to consolidate Cold War gains and maintain regional stability: securing the legacy of the Soviet Union's weapons of mass destruction; to help the Central Asian states achieve and defend their newly won sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity against the return of Russian neo-imperialism; break Russia's monopoly on oil and gas pipelines and transit routes in Central Asia and reduce the region's dependence on Russia in this sector. After 9/11, the United States changed its security strategy towards Central Asia. Taking the opportunity of counter-terrorism cooperation, the United States once opened military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Due to the human rights and other aspects of the Central Asian countries, the United States relations with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other countries deteriorated, and was forced to withdraw its military presence in Central Asia. A brief review of the bases or establishments it had opened in Central Asia reveals that its base in Uzbekistan lasted from 2001 to 2005, its NATO liaison office in Tashkent lasted from 2013 to 2016, and its military base at Manas Airport in Kyrgyzstan lasted from 2001 to 2013. After the full withdrawal of US-led NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021, the United States tried again to negotiate with Central Asian countries to restore a military presence in Central Asia to some extent, but it was unsuccessful. At present, its security presence in the region is basically limited to emphasizing the defense of the sovereignty of the Central Asian states in its Central Asia Strategy or at the C5+1 Summit to hedge against the influence of China and Russia at the psychological level of the Central Asian states, with limited substantive security presence.

China's security role in Central Asia is mainly reflected in its security cooperation with Central Asian countries at the bilateral level and under multilateral mechanisms such as the SCO. For example, China has actively engaged in security cooperation with Tajikistan, and in 2015, Chinese and Tajik special operations forces held a joint counter-terrorism operation at a mountain training center outside Dushanbe. In 2016, a joint force of about 10,000 troops carried out an operation in the Badakhshan Mountains, and

in the same year, the four-Nation Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Coordination Mechanism was established with the participation of China, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2019, a joint anti-terrorism exercise called "Cooperation-2019" was held in Tajikistan, with about 1,200 troops from both sides participating. On November 22, 2022, Tajikistan and China decided to conduct joint counter-terrorism operations every two years. In addition, China also actively carries out security cooperation with Central Asian countries under the framework of the SCO. For example, in 2021, the SCO Joint anti-terrorism military exercise "Peace Mission-2021" was held in Russia, which is the 14th joint exercise within the framework of the SCO. Eight SCO member states, including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Pakistan and Uzbekistan, participated in the exercise, with a total military force of about 4,000. The Chinese side sent a total of 558 personnel and 130 vehicles (equipment). This military exercise aims to vividly demonstrate the SCO member states' unwavering determination and robust unity in solidarity and cooperation, effectively deterring the "three forces" while safeguarding regional peace and stability.

### **Economic sphere**

In the economic sphere, in recent years, China, the United States and Russia's tripartite game presents a general situation that is roughly as follows: in the field of trade, China has risen to become the largest trading partner of the Central Asian countries in recent years and widened the gap with Russia in 2022, while the U.S. trade with the Central Asian countries is only about one-tenth of Russia's trade volume in 2021-2022. In the field of investment, from the point of view of stock, as of 2021, Russia's investment stock is slightly more than that of China and the United States; from the point of view of increment, China, the United States and Russia in the five Central Asian countries have their own focus on investment, the United States takes Kazakhstan as the absolute center of gravity of investment, and its investment in Kazakhstan is far more than that of China and Russia, China is gradually taking the lead in terms of investment in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan,

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, while Russia maintains a high level of investment in two key countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and a high presence in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. At the same time, China, Russia and the United States have different focus or special economic relations in Central Asia, which makes the economic game of the three countries in Central Asia more complicated.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, in the area of trade, China's trade with the five Central Asian countries reached a record \$70.2 billion in 2022, not only securing its position as Central Asia's top trading partner, but also widening the gap with Russia, whose trade with the Central Asian countries was \$42 billion in 2022, or \$28.2 billion less than China's. In contrast, China's and Russia's trade with Central Asian countries in 2021 was \$41.9 billion and \$35.7 billion, respectively, a difference of only \$6.2 billion. On the other hand, U.S. trade with Central Asian countries lags far behind, at \$3.3 billion and \$4.4 billion in 2021 and 2022, respectively, about one-tenth of Russia's level over the same period.

In the field of investment, in terms of stock, Russia has more investment stock in Central Asia than China and the United States. In 2021, the cumulative volume of Russian investments in Central Asia has reportedly reached about \$50 billion, with Kazakhstan accounting for about \$36 billion, Uzbekistan for more than \$10 billion, and Tajikistan for about \$1.5 billion. At the same time, U.S. FDI in Central Asia reached \$40 billion in 2021, and almost all of it was spent on oil and gas development in Kazakhstan. Also, according to a September 19, 2022 report by the Kazakh Economic Research Institute, U.S. FDI in Kazakhstan totaled \$48.8 billion, or nearly 13.5% of the total FDI attracted to Kazakhstan. In addition, by the end of 2020, China's cumulative FDI in Central Asia also amounted to about \$40 billion. Of this amount, \$21.4 billion was invested in Kazakhstan.

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Due to the limitations of data availability, differences in statistical calibers and uneven quality of data, this part can only try to make a general overview and analysis of the relevant situation as far as possible based on the information that the author can collect. If there are any fallacies, readers are welcome to criticize and correct them.

In terms of incremental investment, the distribution of Chinese, Russian, and U.S. investment in Central Asia varies. In the case of Kazakhstan, U.S. investment is significantly higher than that of Russia and China. In 2021, U.S. investment in Kazakhstan amounted to \$2.8 billion, while Russia and China invested \$1.9 billion and \$1.84 billion in Kazakhstan, respectively. As U.S. investment in Kazakhstan investments increased, as well as the contraction of Russian foreign investment in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War and international sanctions, by the end of 2022, the pattern evolved to include \$5.1 billion in U.S. investment in Kazakhstan, compared to \$1.5 billion and \$1.4 billion in Russian and Chinese investment, respectively.

In addition, if we start counting from 2013, the year of the Belt and Road Initiative, the total amount of Chinese investment in Kazakhstan has already exceeded that of Russia. Specifically, from 2013 to the first half of 2023, the United States (\$39.4 billion), China (\$15.3 billion), and Russia (\$14.2 billion) ranked second, fourth, and fifth among the top ten investors in Kazakhstan. In the case of Uzbekistan, U.S. investment is much smaller. For example, in the first half of 2023, China and Russia were the two largest investors with 20.5 percent and 18.8 percent, respectively, of Uzbekistan's roughly \$5 billion in foreign investment, with the United States lagging far behind at only 1.9 percent. For Kyrgyzstan, the top three countries in terms of direct investment in the country by the end of 2022 are Turkey (\$341.6 million), China (\$326 million), and Russia (\$145.6 million), with the U.S. lagging significantly behind with only about \$62 billion dollars. And in the first nine months of 2023, the top three investments in Kyrgyzstan became China (\$157.8 million), Russia (\$131.7 million) and Kazakhstan (\$54.9 million). In addition, Tajikistan received FDI totaling \$429 million in 2022, of which 99.8 percent was from China. In 2021, Turkmenistan received FDI amounting to \$1.45 billion, bringing the investment stock to about \$40.7 billion, and the country's main investors are China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

Furthermore, the economic interactions of Russia, the United States and China with Central Asia have their own special links and focuses. For its part, Russia has special economic ties with Central Asian countries in terms of labor remittances. Much of the economy of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, depends on remittances from Russia. In 2022, remittances from migrant workers to Uzbekistan accounted for 11 percent of the country's GDP and more than 26 percent of GDP to Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, according to Fitch International, a leading ratings firm, since the Ukraine conflict began, an influx of about 100,000 Russians have settled in Uzbekistan, meaning that Uzbekistan's economy has become more closely tied to Russia. Also, the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian situation provides new opportunities for trade cooperation between Russia and Central Asia. While trying to avoid secondary Western sanctions, the Central Asian countries are operating in parallel with large imports from Europe and large exports to Russia, and the volume of trade with Russia is growing rapidly. In 2022, Kazakhstan's trade with Russia reached a record \$26 billion, and its merchandise exports to Russia increased by 25 percent. Also according to data published by Central Asian countries, trade between Russia and Central Asian countries increased by 20% to \$41 billion in 2022.

As for the United States, as mentioned above, the development of oil and gas in Kazakhstan is a core interest of U.S. investment in Central Asia. As reported in September 2022, the United States, one of the top three investors in the Kazakh economy, has invested heavily in Kazakhstan's mining sector, accounting for 30 percent of total foreign direct investment in the sector, in addition to the financial insurance and exploration sectors, which attracted 6.6 percent and 9.8 percent of U.S. direct investment, respectively. At the first U.S.-Central Asia Summit in September 2023, special attention was once again given to deepening cooperation in mineral development, with commitments to build diversified, resilient, and secure supply chains for critical minerals, develop new raw material extraction and processing technologies, and launch the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue. At the same time, the United States also

responded to the connectivity issues of great concern to Central Asian countries, saying that it will continue to invest in and develop the trans-Caspian trade route, the so-called "Middle Corridor", as well as energy infrastructure and extension of the transportation network connecting Central and South Asia, and promote the diversification of transportation routes.

As a country that borders the Central Asia and sees it as an important partner, China and Central Asia are engaged in broad cooperation. And under the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Xi'an Summit in 2023, the breadth and depth of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries are expected to expand further. Taking the Xi'an Declaration issued by the countries after the China-Central Asia Summit as an example, in addition to planning to further expand the scale of trade and investment, the parties also committed to developing cooperation between China and Central Asian countries in emerging areas such as e-commerce, digital trade, green economy, etc.; accelerating the construction of connectivity, promoting the construction of the China-Central Asia transport corridor, and the development of multimodal transit and transport in the directions of China-Central Asia-South Asia, China-Central Asia-Middle East , China-Central Asia-Europe, including along the China-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran route and trans-Caspian routes using the seaports of Aktau, Kuryk and Turkmenbashi, as well as the transit and transport capabilities of the city of Termez; deepening cooperation in the field of energy, including expanding cooperation in the whole energy industry chain, further expanding cooperation in traditional energy fields such as oil, natural gas and coal, and strengthening cooperation in renewable energy sources such as hydropower, solar energy and wind energy.

### **Cultural sphere**

In the field of culture, Russia still has a strong cultural influence in Central Asia by virtue of the greater influence of the Russian language in the region, its historical ties with the Central Asian countries and its economic attraction to the Central Asian countries at present. At the same time, Russia also has a strong willingness to expand and manage

its soft power in Central Asia. For example, Russia is an absolute leader in educational cooperation with Central Asian countries. According to reports in May 2023, 25 Russian universities have opened and operated branches in Central Asian countries, of which 14 are in Uzbekistan, 6 in Kazakhstan, 3 in Tajikistan and 2 in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, the project to establish a joint Turkoman-Russian university in Ashgabat has entered the approval stage. In addition, Russia plans to open branch schools of Moscow State University, Kazan University and Higher School of Economics in Kyrgyzstan, and branches of the Russian State University for the Humanities, the Moscow State University of Geodesy and Cartography and the North Caucasus Federal University in Uzbekistan. According to the report, about 185,000 students from Central Asian countries were studying in Russia at the time, including 60,000 citizens of Kazakhstan, 46,000 citizens of Uzbekistan, 31,000 citizens of Turkmenistan, 30,000 citizens of Tajikistan and 16,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan. Of these, about 68,000 students (40% of the total number of students in Central Asia) have their study expenses covered by the Russian government.

The United States, with its international leading role, developed economy and powerful ideological propaganda tools, has also gained great cultural influence in Central Asia. According to the author's field observation in Tashkent, there are a large number of IELTS English training institutions in the Uzbek capital, and there are a large number of Uzbek people queuing up to apply for green cards in the United States, a young Uzbek interviewed frankly said: "I love Uzbekistan, this is my hometown, but I also want to go to the United States." On the other hand, the United States is also actively pursuing a soft power strategy in Central Asia. Since 1993, young people in Central Asia have been receiving study and training in the framework of various educational programs. Among them, the Bolashak program is one of the most prestigious projects. Through such projects, Western countries aim to make Central Asia's elites embrace Western values and international norms. According to information released by the U.S. Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs in February 2020, approximately 1.4 million Central Asians

visit American Spaces each year to learn English, experience American culture, and gain in-demand skills. Since their independence, more than 40,000 Central Asian students, professionals, and officials have received U.S. funding to travel to the United States for career opportunities. In addition, the United States has sought to gain a foothold in the educational market of Central Asian countries by establishing universities in the region, such as the Kazakh-American University in Almaty and the American University of CA located in Bishkek. In addition to universities, the United States grants through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) program and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to support the development of pro-Western public associations, mass media and other non-governmental organizations to spread Western liberal democratic values and promote public recognition and support for American values in Central Asia.

China's cultural influence in Central Asia is relatively weak but growing rapidly. With the rise of Chinese influence in Central Asia, more and more people are becoming interested in the Chinese language and Chinese culture. At the same time, China is also actively enhancing its soft power in Central Asia. For example, the number of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia has been increasing in recent years. Since 2004, China has set up 13 Confucius Institutes in Central Asia, including 5 in Kazakhstan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, and 2 each in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which are widely welcomed by the Central Asian people. The establishment and good operation of Confucius Institutes not only carry forward and spread Chinese culture, but also train a large number of Chinese-speaking talents, and cultivate strength for further cooperation between China and Central Asian countries. In addition, higher education cooperation between China and Central Asian countries is also on the rise. On October 12, 2023, in order to actively implement the outcomes of the China-Central Asia Summit and implement the "Belt and Road" initiative, the Northwestern Polytechnical University of Kazakhstan Branch was officially opened in Almaty, marking the official launch of China's first high-level university in the place where the "Belt and Road" initiative was first proposed. On

January 22, 2024, the first Uzbek-Chinese educational forum hosted by the Ministry of Education of China and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of Uzbekistan was held in Beijing. The participants focused on the dialogue mechanism of higher education, international cooperation and exchanges, and strengthening mutual learning of civilizations between China and Uzbekistan, reached a series of cooperation intentions, and signed a number of strategic agreements on cooperation projects. During the Forum, China and Uzbekistan also jointly issued the Beijing Declaration on Cooperation between Universities of Uzbekistan and China, marking a new level of higher education cooperation between China and Uzbekistan.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the above sorting and analysis, it can be argued that Russia still has strong influence in Central Asia in all aspects, even against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian war. China's influence in Central Asia is strongest in the economic sphere, but its influence in diplomacy, security, culture and other areas is also gradually rising, and considering the increasing importance China and Central Asian countries attach to each other, it can be said that the development of the relevant areas has a bright future. In order to hedge against the influence of China and Russia, the United States has also increased its attention to Central Asia in recent years, hoping to further expand its presence in the region. In short, with the geopolitical importance of Central Asia further highlighted, Russia, China and the United States are actively increasing their influence in the region, it can be predicted that the future all-round game of the three countries in Central Asia will be even more intense, because this game will largely determine the increase or decrease of the regional and global influence of the three countries, and the three countries' own rise or fall.

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