

POLICY BRIEF

#86, JUNE 2023



The regional security regime emerging in Central Asia

by Anna Jordanova

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Moscow's inability to reach a quick and decisive victory in Ukraine became apparent and Western states continued to sustain their strong support for Kyiv, the regimes of Central Asia found themselves having to rapidly recalibrate their relationships with Russia in light of the inevitable long-term negative consequences of sanctions and political isolation. The initial strategic silence, taken to weather the imminent uncertainty, evolved into the cautious implementation of short and mid-term survival and pragmatic measures, which simultaneously capitalized on the peaking interest of Western actors, bearing diplomatic gifts and promises of investments, in the region.

However, the main imperatives of each autocratic regime are its own survival and prosperity, followed by a desire for maximal possible decision-making autonomy. Although momentous, the consequences of the invasion are only one of the challenges the regimes face today. These challenges are both domestic and foreign, and precede the Ukrainian crisis or are totally unrelated to it. Discreditation of Moscow, distrust of Beijing, and mounting threats have forced the Central Asian leaders to seek regional cooperation.

Central Asian states have adopted and developed self-protection mechanisms against domestic and foreign factors that threaten regime stability and autonomy. As a result, there is a qualitatively different model of regional relations emerging across Central Asia: a new international regime aimed at preserving the existing power structure, security, and stability at the expense of genuine or imagined challenges.

Under these circumstances, democratic OSCE members should carefully consider their commitments and joint activities in the region so as not to contribute to consolidating authoritarianism. Instead, the OSCE should focus more on human security and preventing further securitization of the region and civil society. The organization's expertise is relevant for these areas, has the potential to strengthen its reputation and credibility, and allows for the addressing of human rights and related issues despite the developing autocratic tendencies.

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The OSCE Academy's Policy Briefs became possible with financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Academy's Cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

Policy challenge: the international security regime in Central Asia

Each Central Asian state has developed a distinct foreign policy strategy, befitting the domestic agenda and leader's priorities. From the Kazakh "multivectorism" coined by the first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to the "mustaqillik (independence)" mantra of his Uzbek counterpart Islam Karimov, **there are two shared baselines: pragmatism and a balanced approach to international partners wherever possible and affordable.**¹

The necessity of diversified partnerships is evident in the security arena. Renewed chaos in Afghanistan threatens the region both militarily and ideologically. Russia and Iran will probably remain sanctioned for the foreseeable future. If Beijing uses force against Taiwan and encounters similar problems, the **Caspian Sea will become the region's only stable and sanction-free border.**

Furthermore, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, each country in Central Asia has recently launched **a power-transitioning operation** or expects one to occur soon. In the eyes of the leaders, transition periods put regimes in a position even more vulnerable to the canonical threats of radicalism, separatism, and terrorism.

Hence, preventing any possible regime-level challenges, from armed conflicts to the so-called "colour revolutions" (public protests), has become the ultimate imperative. Given the current international circumstances, the **Central Asian states have concluded that it may be necessary to rely more on themselves and the region to maintain this stability.** To strengthen their chances, they are developing a so-called international security regime.

International regimes, as defined by Stephen

Krasner, represent a set of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which the expectations of the actors converge in a given issue or geographic area.² The regime and legitimacy-challenging threats such as radicalism-extremism, terrorism, and genuine, relevant political opposition are such issues. Cooperation on taming these is beneficial overall: any regime's collapse would lead to significant risk for any of the neighbouring states. Establishing a regional security regime does not prevent its members from coming into conflict or competing in other areas; it prevents them from jeopardizing each other's survival.

Kazakhstan faced unprecedented protests and violence in January 2022; Uzbekistan experienced discontent in Karakalpakstan in July 2022, and Tajikistan has been waging a violent crackdown on the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) since 2022. In each of these cases, the governments provided each other mutual verbal support (or at least avoided harsh direct criticism). They took proactive, practical security measures as well – such as extraditing opposition members to their home countries.

International regimes do not need to be declared on paper and may (or not) be accompanied by formal institutions and agreements.³ The security regime currently emerging in the region is evolving spontaneously; it reflects the genuine priorities and levels of commitment of the actors involved and does not require an explicit declaration to function.⁴

As the primary commitment is to regime autonomy and state sovereignty, and there are existing regional animosities, formal strictly binding integration can lead to more harm than help. Herein lies the preference for organizations with a loose institutional formats, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

¹ Alternatives: multipolarism, equidistant politics, et cetera. See: Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective," *China Int Strategy Review*, no. 3, (2021): 300–315; Alexander Korolev, "Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging: China–Russia Relations," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 375–397.

² Stephen D. Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables." *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 185–205.

³ Oran R. Young, "Regime Dynamics: The Rise and Fall of International Regimes." *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 277–97.

⁴ Maja Bovcon, "Françafrique and regime theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 1, (2013): 5–26.

or Turkic Council,⁵ and for equally non-binding summits between Central Asian presidents and other high-profile representatives (which also serve to contribute to legitimacy).

In this regard, even the timing of the Russian invasion goes against the interests of the Central Asian regimes, as it destabilizes the existing regime-stabilizing mechanisms. Although Moscow remains a vital partner for economic affairs, Vladimir Putin's strong nationalistic statements concerning their sovereignty shattered his predictability and reliability. Given the persistent Sinophobia, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and high value placed on sovereignty in Uzbekistan, Beijing is not in a position (and lacks the interest) to replace Moscow.

Policy change: agency recognition and a values-based approach

Providing means to address extra-regime and state-related threats (for example, intelligence sharing⁶ in order to prevent terrorist attacks committed by foreign radical armed groups), is an important benefit and handy complement to cooperation within formal security organizations (the CSTO) or with individual partners (the US).

However, their core contribution concerns national power regime stabilization. International regimes (as well as organizations) can become, in this regard, **instrumental in stabilizing the authoritarian rule of the member regimes:**⁷ encompassing coup-

proofing, mutual legitimacy boosting, bilateral regime support or joint efforts to suppress opposition.

Furthermore, the strengthening of regional security cooperation and autocratic domestic governance are co-occurring and mutually enforcing phenomena. Each of the five Central Asian states has recently invested significant efforts into boosting national security apparatuses.

In Kyrgyzstan, under the current leader Sadyr Japarov (who ascended to power amidst the 2020 electoral protests⁸), cases of measures taken by the state against civil society and opposition are increasing. The most vivid examples are the ongoing pressure against the RFE-RL newsroom in the country which are aimed at the shutdown of its operations,⁹ the mass arrests of activists in the so-called Kempir-Abad water reservoir case in 2022,¹⁰ renewed attempts to introduce the Russia-inspired law on the so-called "foreign agents,"¹¹ or the adoption of constitutional amendments in 2021 which significantly strengthened the presidential-executive power at the expense of the parliament.

The leaders of Kazakhstan (Kasym-Jomart Tokayev) and Uzbekistan (Shavkat Mirziyoyev) are walking similar paths in securing their positions and shaping national institutions according to their needs and visions. In these two cases, their efforts have also been shaped by the efforts to consolidate presidential power following legitimacy-challenging discontent in the wider publics.

⁵ Nicole Bayat Grajewski, "Iran and the SCO: The Quest for Legitimacy and Regime Preservation," *Middle East Policy* 1, no. 24 (2023).

⁶ Туркменистан и Таджикистан активизируют взаимодействие по линии спецслужб, *TurkmenPortal*, May 10 2023, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/61691/turkmenistan-i-tadzhikistan-aktiviziruyut-vzaimodeistvie-po-linii-specsluzhb>.

⁷ Anastassia Obydenkova and Alexander Libman, "Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (October 2018): 151-65.

⁸ Asel Doolotkeldieva, "The 2020 Violent Change in Government in Kyrgyzstan Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: Three Distinct Stories in One" in *Between Peace and Conflict in the East and the West*, ed. Anja Mihr (Springer, 2021), 57-174.

⁹ Bishkek Court Approves Ministry Request To Shut Down RFE/RL's Operations In Kyrgyzstan, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, April 27, 2023, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-rferl-shut-down/32381981.html>.

¹⁰ Kyrgyzstan: Free the 22 'Kempir-Abad' Protest Detainees, *Human Rights Watch*, March 20 2023, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/20/kyrgyzstan-free-22-kempir-abad-protest-detainees>

¹¹ Kyrgyzstan Attempts to Adopt Foreign Agent Law Again, *OCCRP*, May 27, 2023, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/17681-kyrgyzstan-attempts-to-adopt-foreign-agent-law-again>

In January 2022, nationwide protests against worsening economic conditions, general stagnation, and corruption affected Tokayev's ultimate rise to power at the expense of his predecessor's power group,¹² and the authorities' unwillingness¹³ to engage in an honest debate about the so-called Bloody January events continue to mar Tokayev's legitimacy.

The protests of the residents of the formally sovereign Republic of Karakalpakstan in July 2022 were provoked after Tashkent's attempt to remove its sovereign status through the adoption of a new constitution. Shavkat Mirziyoyev's government backed down from this issue, but the public political debate about state intervention is similarly absent.¹⁴

In Tajikistan, Dushanbe's ongoing pressure on the non-state structures of GBAO¹⁵ is indeed another peak of post-civil war reinforcement of President Emomali Rahmon's power.¹⁶ Nevertheless, its intensity and persistence should also be linked with the expected installation of the President's successor and subsequent reshuffling of power. President Rahmon just celebrated his 70th birthday. Should he choose to orchestrate the transition of the presidential office, which the long-term grooming of his son Rustam Emomali suggests,¹⁷ the time window for such a delicate operation (requiring as stable a state and society as possible) is gradually shrinking.

The regimes of Central Asia are not built solely on the political will and pragmatism of the current leaders. Alongside meetings of representatives of security apparatuses, the states work tirelessly, for example, on

legal harmonization concerning the freedom of the media and activities of NGOs, or on mechanisms concerning transnational repression. In some prominent cases, such as those involving terrorism or extremism, "harmonization" means literally copy-pasting pieces of foreign legislation, primarily from Russia.¹⁸

In this regard, it becomes vital to **understand the agencies and priorities of the Central Asian states and their perception of threats to their regime** appropriately. The main focus on this is currently linked to the war in Ukraine, and the relationship between Central Asia and Moscow will likely remain under the spotlight in the future as well. However, from the local perspective, there are other, equally pressing frontlines.

There are **armed groups** on the Afghan territory aiming their propaganda at Uzbek and Tajik societies, as well as possible negative consequences from armed conflicts in the near abroad. Tensions and **clashes over water resources containing ethno-political dimensions** have repeatedly occurred within and beyond the region (Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan). With ongoing climate change, these resources will inevitably become scarcer, and such conflicts are more likely to occur more often and with higher intensity than before.

The **unpredictable behaviour of the leadership in Russia** has expectably led to questioning of its capability and attractiveness as a patron and supporter. It has also raised concerns regarding Moscow's possible political (and even military) adventurism towards Central Asia – now or in the future. Since Central

¹² Chris Rickleton, Nurgul Tapaeva and Saniya Tokien, "Despite Government Promises To Be More Responsive, Kazakhstan's Protesting Oil Workers Are All But Ignored," RFE-RL, April 12, 2023, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-new-parliament-protesting-oil-workers/32361056.html>

¹³ Almaz Kumenov, Kazakhstan: One year on from Bloody January, officials stick to their story, January 5, 2023, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-one-year-on-from-bloody-january-officials-stick-to-their-story>

¹⁴ Uzbekistan: Police Abuses in Autonomous Region Protests, Human Rights Watch, November 7, 2022, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/07/uzbekistan-police-abuses-autonomous-region-protests>

¹⁵ Tajikistan: Free Autonomous Region Rights Defender, Human Rights Watch, April 4, 2023, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/04/tajikistan-free-autonomous-region-rights-defender>

¹⁶ Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 30-46.

¹⁷ Parviz Mullodjanov, Features and Prospects of the Transit of Power in Tajikistan, CABAR, May 5, 2020, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://cabar.asia/en/features-and-prospects-of-the-transit-of-power-in-tajikistan>

¹⁸ Darya Podolskaya, 79 % of Kyrgyz laws on terrorism and extremism copied from Russian ones, 24kg, 8 May, 2019, accessed May 31, 2023, https://24.kg/english/117068_79_of_Kyrgyz_laws_on_terrorism_and_extremism_copied_from_Russian_ones/

Asian military apparatuses are still closely affiliated with their Russian counterpart, and maintenance of broader political, economic, and social ties is absolutely necessary, any sudden decoupling is hard to anticipate. Shielding the regimes from an unpredictable and unstable Moscow and **protecting decision-making autonomy** while preserving the other ties has thus become a relevant security issue.

Last (but not least), there is **intra-state opposition**. Strong democratic civil society provides political alternatives, activists and media monitor leadership's activities and mistakes, and religious groups question the very legitimacy of their rule. Such groups are natural challengers to every autocratic regime, although each state in the region has developed a distinct set of measures and policies concerning them.

An established international security regime across Central Asia might affect the countries' relationships with Western OSCE members in multiple ways. The existence of such a mutually supporting security regime would make the members more resilient against external pressure in areas such as freedom of the press, protection for human rights, and the maintenance of civil society and political opposition, and raise more obstacles for value-based security policy.

Recommendations:

Based on the abovementioned issues, three main sets of tasks are emerging before the OSCE members.

1. The OSCE should focus on promoting human security across its Central Asian members.

Within the Central Asian security regime there is little or no room for ordinary people. This is partly due to the usual focus of autocratic states on values other than individual prosperity. It is also likely that the regimes view at least some specific groups of citizens with

suspicion as potential threats or challengers. Hence, the OSCE should make use of this available space and draw the attention of the authorities to the security of individuals and their everyday lives as a vital component of a stable society.

Issues such as the prevention of the securitization and politicization of water sources or cross-border contacts and assistance in establishing long-term stable and sustainable mechanisms reflects the organization's capacities.

In such areas, the OSCE will be able to keep addressing issues concerning human rights and/or civilian protection while simultaneously keeping in touch with institutions relevant to the organization's presence in the country. Given the proximity to the local civilian population, human security provides an opportunity to build a credible reputation.

2. OSCE should carefully consider its engagement in security-related activities, especially beyond the conventional 'Western' security paradigm.

The perception of threats by Central Asian autocratic regimes, as outlined above, brings about acute and specific questions regarding sectors and areas of security cooperation with other OSCE members.

Cooperation in combatting terrorism or criminal activities is expected and proper, benefiting all members alike. However, in other areas, cases have become more blurred. For example, in combatting radicalism and extremism, alleged perpetrators pursued by local authorities may remain peaceful political activists in the eyes of foreigners. Extraditions of activists, journalists, and human rights defenders from countries such as Germany to their home countries¹⁹ naturally triggers responses from Human Rights Watch and other relevant organizations. Furthermore, the message of alignment with local regimes has both direct and indirect impacts on the countries' non-democratic development.

¹⁹ Hugh Williamson, "Deportation of Tajik Activist from Germany Raises Concerns." Human Rights Watch, March 20, 2023, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/20/deportation-tajik-activist-germany-raises-concerns>

If the autocratic consolidation of the Central Asian states continues, these controversial requests for cooperation might become more frequent. Without the careful selection of commitments and without a clearly articulated and predictable position, the reputation of the OSCE in the region will be hard to sustain.

3. The OSCE should not back away from its principles

In the security environment of Central Asia, the West (including the OSCE) is a complementary actor. The local states have made great efforts to avoid being trapped in geopolitical competition and being forced to “choose” among their partners because any such decision inevitably entails the loss of already scarce opportunities. However, if the

regimes were forced to make a choice, the West would not be the first option as relationships and dependencies with Moscow and Beijing are much more complex. The cautious balancing necessary after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has put the precariousness of the approach under a direct spotlight.

In the context mentioned above, the OSCE should not compromise on its principles in order to gain more short-term benefits. In the long run, this would not provide stable leverage against Central Asian authoritarianism, and it would instead affect the organizations value-based reputation and credibility. On the contrary, Central Asian countries should be encouraged to embrace the efforts of the organization they are members of.

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