

VALDAI DISCUSSION CLUB REPORT



**Valdai** | Discussion  
Club

[www.valdaiclub.com](http://www.valdaiclub.com)

**RUSSIA, CHINA, AND USA IN CENTRAL ASIA:  
A BALANCE OF INTERESTS  
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION**

**Timofey Bordachev, Wan Qingsong, Andrew Small**

**MOSCOW, SEPTEMBER 2016**

# Authors

---

## Timofey Bordachev

Programme Director of the Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club, Director of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Ph.D. in Political Science

## Andrew Small

Senior Transatlantic Fellow, Asia program, German Marshall Fund of the United States

## Wan Qingsong

Research Fellow of the Center for Russian Studies (the National Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences under the Ministry of Education of PRC), School of Advanced International and Area Studies at East China Normal University; Research Fellow of the Center for Co-development with Neighboring Countries (University - Based Think Tank of Shanghai); holds a Doctorate in Political Science

*The authors express their gratitude for assistance in preparing the report and selection of reference materials to Kazakova Anastasia, Research Assistant, Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the National Research University – Higher School of Economics.*

*The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.*

# Contents

---

Introduction: The Challenge of Central Asia .....	3
The Interests of the Parties .....	5
Areas of Cooperation.....	14

*The extent and potential for confrontation between the major powers is significantly lower in Central Asia than in the Asia-Pacific region (APR), Eastern Europe or the Middle East. The potential for cooperation is greater because Russia, China, and especially the United States have no vital need to dominate in the region. Therefore, none of these three powers will unleash a war against the others for the sake of Central Asia – as compared to Europe or Southeast Asia, for example. This fact alone could serve as a powerful resource for the development of trilateral cooperation that could become deep and substantive, or remain non-binding in character.*

## Introduction: The Challenge of Central Asia

At first glance, cooperation between the U.S., China, and Russia for maintaining security in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) might seem to have little chance of success. However, the authors of this report believe that Washington, Moscow, and Beijing hold significant resources for cooperating to provide elements of regional security in Central Asia. At the same time, these resources come with obvious limitations. Maximum effort should go toward advancing the common good so that confrontation does not dominate the agenda. To reduce the potential for conflict as much as possible, the three major powers would do well to explore thoroughly the potential areas and opportunities available to them for cooperation.

The Central Asian region is a growing concern to its neighbors and to major non-regional players. It borders one of the most dangerous hotbeds of radicalism today – Afghanistan, whose territory is also home to a significant number of ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks. It is very possible that, after their inevitable defeat in the Middle East, Islamic State<sup>1</sup>

will try to create a new “caliphate” in Central Asia – especially because, according to experts, it is safer for them to operate in that region than in North Africa. Tensions are already escalating significantly in the Central Asian areas that border Afghanistan.

Despite the significant progress that the existing regimes have achieved in stabilizing the Central Asian “five” (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the current prospects for those states to achieve internal stability are increasingly uncertain. Outside observers see no clear mechanism for the transfer of power after the ruling “patriarchs” in Astana and Tashkent inevitably leave the scene due to natural causes. Even the internal stability that does exist suffers occasional setbacks by outbursts of violence, as happened, for example, in early June of this year in the Kazakh city of Aktobe, and in July in the former capital of Kazakhstan, Alma-Ata.

Having gained independence and sovereignty after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of Central Asia (CA) became full-fledged participants in international relations. However, they are still working

<sup>1</sup> Banned in Russia. – Ed. note.

to achieve self-sufficiency in terms of socio-economic and institutional development, and in maintaining internal political stability and state integrity. The interests of the outside actors overlap to a remarkable degree in this respect. In particular, **China, Russia, and the United States, despite their “history of relations” with CA, are essentially interested in the same thing – preventing the region from becoming another hotbed of global instability.** The U.S. is most interested in how these issues play out in the global context, whereas Russia and China focus more on their regional significance and the potential problems that can extend across borders.

The fact that both Russia and China want to prevent current or future instability in Kazakhstan and the rest of Central Asia from spreading into their territories makes it logical that they look for ways to cooperate rather than compete. Potential instability in Central Eurasia is a sort of “perfect common challenge” that Russia and China can resolve only with a rational, positive sum game. The geographic proximity of this potentially explosive region is an important consideration for both major powers. Kazakhstan and Central Asia directly border China’s troubled problem-plagued Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as well as Russia’s vitally important Urals and Central Siberian regions. Both powers realize that, if the situation were to deteriorate, they could not simply foist problems onto the other party, but would have to cooperate “on the spot.”

Russia and China have a variety of formats for cooperation they can offer to neighboring Central Asian countries looking to improve internal stability. Consider the counter-example of efforts by the European Union to stabilize its own periphery. After the EU expanded successfully in 2004–2007,

it introduced its “Neighborhood Policy,” a Euro-centric integrative entity aimed at stabilizing its neighbors by encouraging them to adopt EU institutional practices and norms. In other words, this project could transform its participants and provide them with further preferences on the condition that they fulfilled a certain set of criteria. By contrast, Russia and China do not seek to transform, but to stabilize the political regimes in Central Eurasia, to freeze the situation there as much as possible, and for as long as possible.

Thus, Russia and China are more likely to choose a paradigm for cooperation in Central Asian, at least on paper, if not in practice. Moreover, efforts to stabilize the region could become a unifying factor for Russia and China in the overall global context and could lead to a sort of “proto-alliance” between them<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, of course no one can drag China into Central Asia against its will. It is important to examine the actual conditions that exist for both powers to cooperate with the U.S., and with other non-regional players.

Multilateral cooperation in the region should in no way prompt China to view the process as “strategic encirclement.” Under no circumstances would Russia invite non-regional players into Central Asia. However, Moscow should help to ensure that the real potential and diplomatic maneuverings of those outside powers contribute to regional stability and to responsible behavior on the part of the regional elite. It is good to see that these elite now conduct themselves like important and responsible partners, and it is necessary to support them on this path.

The United States is unquestionably the most important non-regional player

<sup>2</sup> See Valdai paper #50 “Russia and China in Central Asia: the great win-win game”, author – T. Bordachev.

in Central Asia and it is difficult to determine the potentially positive contribution that it could make to security in Central Asia. Signs have appeared that U.S. policy seeks to accentuate possible elements of mistrust between Moscow and Beijing on issues related to Central Asia. At the same time, some Russian experts believe that Washington is looking to bypass Russia and establish a direct dialogue with the Chinese authorities on issues of regional security and economic cooperation, that it often casts Russia as a “declining” force and China as a “growing” force – implying that Beijing would therefore benefit more from cooperation with the United States.

As a rule, the Chinese authorities take a nuanced position. The Chinese reacted with restraint, if not irritation to increased U.S.–Russian cooperation in Central Asia following September 11, 2001. However, it would probably not be very farsighted for Russia and China to try to exclude the U.S. from regional affairs,

especially because Washington continues to hold significant influence in Central Asian capitals – although observers believe that influence is diminishing.

This paper aims to study the basic approaches of the three powers, identify areas of potential cooperation in Central Asia, and to point out factors that might limit such cooperation. Despite the difference in the approaches of the three states, and in the instruments they use in their relations with the Central Asian republics, the existence of similar goals makes it possible to lay the foundation for mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation in a number of areas. There are no serious grounds at present to hope for comprehensive and wide-ranging cooperation between China, Russia, and the United States, but this does not preclude the possibility of coordinating actions in the region. Our task in this regard is to formulate a positive agenda for the three powers to interact in Central Asia.

## The Interests of the Parties

---

Eurasia’s incredible potential has increasingly placed it at the center of international attention in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here, regional institutions could be created and commonly accepted principles applied that would ensure a leading global role for Eurasia in the future. However, the region’s search for its own identity remains an important issue. The New Silk Road initiative of the U.S. administration, the Eurasian Economic Union integrative project, and China’s Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) all offer visions for international political

structures that would foster cooperation in the region and that share the common aim of strengthening economic ties and expanding cooperation between states. However, a question naturally arises: Are China, Russia, and the United States partners or competitors in Central Asia? Which is the more likely scenario – a clash of interests or mutually beneficial cooperation?

The objectives of the three projects and their geographic locations intersect in one way or another, so the relationship between the three powers will largely



depend on whether they can reach agreement among themselves. In terms of cost and benefit, cooperation has always been the best way to reduce confrontation and thus ensure stability, prosperity, and peace in the international community. Hence, the key question is: How to prepare the ground for cooperation between China, Russia, and the U.S. in Central Asia, and how to realize their enormous potential? In other words, the three countries need to define clearly their priorities and areas of cooperation in the region.

Central Asia is one of those rare regions where the three powers share not only common interests, but also modest examples of mutually beneficial cooperation.

The three powers have repeatedly worked together to deal with the internal situation in Afghanistan and to battle international terrorism – from coordinating their actions on the Northern Distribution Network to recent U.S.-Chinese cooperation in the ongoing peace-making process with the Taliban regime. The three countries also work together within the framework of various international institutions – from financial regulators to the UN Security Council.

Several areas with potential for long-term cooperation have recently emerged. The partial withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan has helped reduce distrust over the presence of permanent U.S. military bases near Chinese and Russian borders. The rise of the Islamic State prompted widespread concern about the risk of militants relocating to Central Asia. After Tehran signed the nuclear agreement for which Russia, China, and the United States had invested considerable effort, Iran was able to “get back into the game,” thus also contributing to greater integration in the region.

For its part, Central Asia is looking forward to a new influx of investments in the local infrastructure, primarily in connection with the launch of China’s SREB project in which many countries in the region plan to participate. Whereas the majority of such plans were openly political in the past, they now focus on attracting the investment necessary for their implementation. So far, the SREB has made only modest progress toward its financial goals. However, the Chinese government did create an SREB fund in 2014 and promised to endow it with \$40 billion, according to official statements. To date it has carried out two investment projects, putting \$1.65 billion into a hydroelectric power station in Karot, Pakistan, and acquiring a 9.9% stake in Yamal LNG from the Russian company Novatek.

Geopolitical and ideological differences will undoubtedly prove a hindrance to closer cooperation between the three powers, especially between the U.S. on one hand, and Russia and China on the other. For this reason, the agenda for cooperation put forth here is strictly a preliminary proposal. Those in the U.S., Russia, and China who are working to identify and study the areas with potential to bring all three sides into closer cooperation should consider **Central Asia, where the extent and potential for confrontation between the major powers is significantly lower than in the Asia-Pacific region (APR), Eastern Europe or the Middle East. The potential for cooperation is greater because Russia, China, and especially the United States have no vital need to dominate in the region. As a result, none of these three powers will unleash a war against the others for the sake of Central Asia.** Although, due to its proximity, Central

Asia presents a more immediate security concern to Russia and China than to the United States, Russia and the U.S. depend more on the situation in Europe for their survival, and China's vital interests lie primarily with the maritime trade routes of East and Southeast Asia.

Definitions vary as to what constitutes Central Asia, but researchers most often refer to the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The authors feel it is important to focus on this region, as distinct from larger Eurasia. Centuries-old Russian and European sources refer to this area as Turkestan – the “Land of the Turks.”

Most of the ongoing regional initiatives are transcontinental in nature in that they involve cooperation among not only the traditional Central Asian republics, but also with neighboring states that have some connection with them. Similarly, many of the current threats in the region are essentially cross-border in character – whether the rise in military confrontation, drug trafficking, or increased activity by specific militant groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan whose members hail from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the countries of Central Asia. It is therefore essential that any form of cooperation must also be broad in scope to be effective. **Such cooperation must invite not only the Central Asian republics to participate actively, but also the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Turkmenistan, Iran, and the countries of South and Southwest Asia.** With regard to Iran, a more detailed analysis is required to determine opportunities for cooperation in light of that country's growing importance to the region.

A number of factors dictate U.S. interests in Central Asia. Unlike Russia, whose role in the region began in the 19th century, and especially China whose involvement predates that considerably, the U.S. is a relative newcomer, first entering the area when the former Soviet republics proclaimed their independence in 1991. In a region dominated by continental powers, the U.S. has occupied a very modest position. Even at the peak of military operations in Afghanistan, Washington's primary goal was the fight against terrorism, without any mention of a wider set of strategic interests in the region. Thereafter, the U.S. attempted to pursue a more consistent line of action in Central Asia – namely one of “ensuring conditions whereby the republics can preserve their sovereignty and independence” (primarily from Russia and China), eliminating the threat of transnational terrorism, fighting drug trafficking and organized crime, encouraging diversification in energy policies, supporting the states in utilizing the opportunities available to them, containing extremist forces in the region, and helping the region to participate in the global economy.

Central Asia served for some time as a major hub of U.S. military deployment in Afghanistan, especially in the initial stages of those operations when Washington lost its supply route through Pakistan and had to establish nearby bases elsewhere. The importance of the Northern Distribution Network has risen dramatically since then. Nevertheless, despite its willingness to pay for access to military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. has not developed any broad cooperation with the Central Asian republics.



Washington has relatively few economic ties with Central Asia<sup>3</sup>, although trade volume with the region gradually increased during the decade starting in 2004, spiking in 2014 by 94% from \$1.693 billion to \$3.276 billion before plummeting by 47% in 2015 to \$1.73 billion. Trade with Kazakhstan accounts for approximately 78% of that volume, Uzbekistan represents 9% of the total, Turkmenistan 8%, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan 3% each. The devaluation of the Kazakh national currency against the U.S. dollar was the primary cause for the sharp drop in both exports (–57%) and imports (–37%)<sup>4</sup>. Beyond that, the U.S. has made almost no investments in any sector in Central Asia other than a few isolated cases of U.S. energy companies investing in oil and gas projects in the region.

At the political level, the United States initiated a variety of projects such as the New Silk Road and the integration of major roads, water supplies, and energy infrastructure both between Central Asian states and in cooperation with South Asian countries. Here again, however, not a single initiative received adequate funding. Following the partial withdrawal of its troops, Washington again attempted to shift its focus from security issues to economic cooperation, an approach that would necessarily imply coordination with major regional powers.

Thus, with Central Asia serving as a favorable venue for the confluence of Russian, Chinese, and U.S. interests, mutually beneficial cooperation – albeit not comprehensive and full-scale – can develop in a wide range of areas. It would be much easier for the three powers to reach

agreement on issues related to Central Asia, in part because Washington does not actively promote democratic values there, meaning that ideological divisions are unlikely to occur. The one exception is the concern that new “color revolutions” could develop. It is apparently necessary to reach some form of unofficial consensus on whether to support so-called “color revolutions” – a phenomenon that China fears, the U.S. welcomes, and Russia approaches with some flexibility, as seen by its reaction to events in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

Chinese interests in Central Asia took practical form in the creation of the SREB concept, indicating a geographic change in priority. “China’s pivot to the West” is dictated by Beijing’s fear of the possible spread of non-traditional threats from Central Asia. This, in turn, became the impetus for creating the SCO in the 1990s, as well as its predecessors. However, Beijing’s concerns only increased following the “color revolutions” of the 2000s. Nonetheless, China’s energy and economic interests continued to grow rapidly, and led to a large-scale project for the construction of a pipeline network in 2003.

The Central Asian countries are developing markedly because of their closer economic ties with China. Those relations have grown so deep that China is becoming one of the region’s most significant trade partners, investors, and financial sponsors. According to official statistics, the volume of that mutual trade totaled only \$460 million when China established diplomatic relations with the five countries of Central Asia in 1992. Twenty years later, in 2012, that indicator had increased 100 times, to almost \$46 billion. In addition, China continues to welcome the development of such tools for cooperation as the EEU, CSTO, and SCO, as evidenced by the Joint

<sup>3</sup> *Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.*

<sup>4</sup> *UNCTAD statistics.*

Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in Conjugation of Construction of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt adopted at a summit in Moscow on May 8, 2015. That document speaks, in particular, of the need to begin talks on an agreement for trade and economic cooperation between the EEU and China, using the SCO as a platform for linking the EEU and the SREB.

In this way, China supports the territorial integrity of Central Asia and contributes to the political stability of its individual states. At the same time, Chinese President Xi Jinping offered assurances that China does not seek dominance in the region or the creation of zones of influence there. To the contrary, Beijing encourages those countries to cooperate with Moscow and other countries of Eurasia.

According to the Chinese leadership, the Silk Road Economic Belt aims to carry out and combine a variety of interests and serves as a development tool for the region through which the land route passes for Chinese exports. Once the U.S. withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, China will have to play a more active political role to ensure regional security. In contrast to the past two decades, Beijing is increasingly aware of its responsibility in that regard. At the same time, China makes a concerted effort to exercise caution with regard to Russia's interests in the region. With China's economic presence far surpassing its political influence in Central Asia, Russia has no cause to react negatively to its activities.

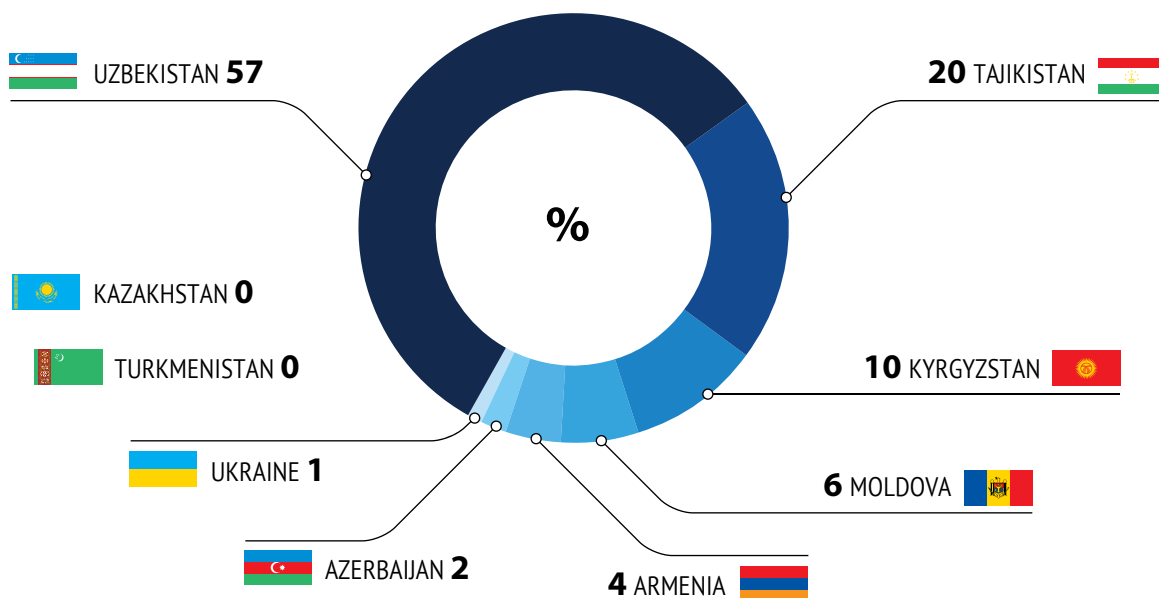
Security concerns largely dictate Russia's interests in the region. Russia's incredibly long land border with Kazakhstan could itself present a serious challenge to national security. If instability spreads into

Central Asia, Russia would have to devote enormous resources – both military and financial – to ensure the inviolability of that border. As the situations in Syria and Iraq have shown, the seizure by terrorists of population centers and roads poses very complex challenges to law enforcement agencies. It is vital that Russia prevent that “recipe for unrest” from spreading from the Middle East into its own backyard – a possibility that admittedly looks increasingly plausible with each passing year.

Two states in the region – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – are members of the Eurasian Economic Union, while Tajikistan participates in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Within the framework of the latter, Russia is directly responsible for protecting its allies from external threats and ensuring their territorial integrity and sovereignty. Recall that Moscow has always found ways to help resolve basic problems of security in the region. Even during the 1990s that were so difficult for the Russian economy, society, and military, Moscow was not indifferent to the tragic events of the civil war in Tajikistan that claimed tens of thousands of lives. First, Russian troops provided protection for the civilian population. Later, Russia played a leading role, together with Iran and Uzbekistan, in providing a start for the peace process and national reconciliation. And, up through the mid-2000s, several dozen Russian soldiers gave their lives while defending Tajikistan's southern border from incursions by religious radicals.

Another significant factor is the economic interdependence between Russia and the Central Asian states that was based from the very beginning on cooperation over labor resources.

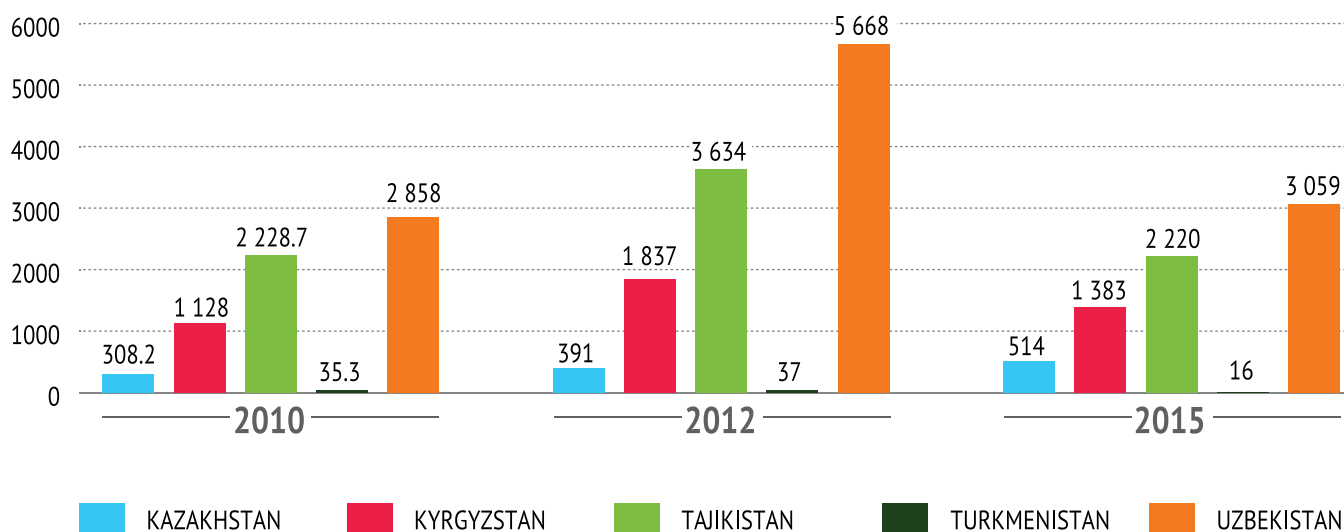
### COUNTRIES EXPORTING THE GREATEST NUMBER OF LABORERS TO RUSSIA IN 2015



Source: Russian Federal State Statistics Service

See also <http://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics>

### TOTAL FUNDS SENT FROM RUSSIA VIA MONEY TRANSFER SYSTEMS (MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)

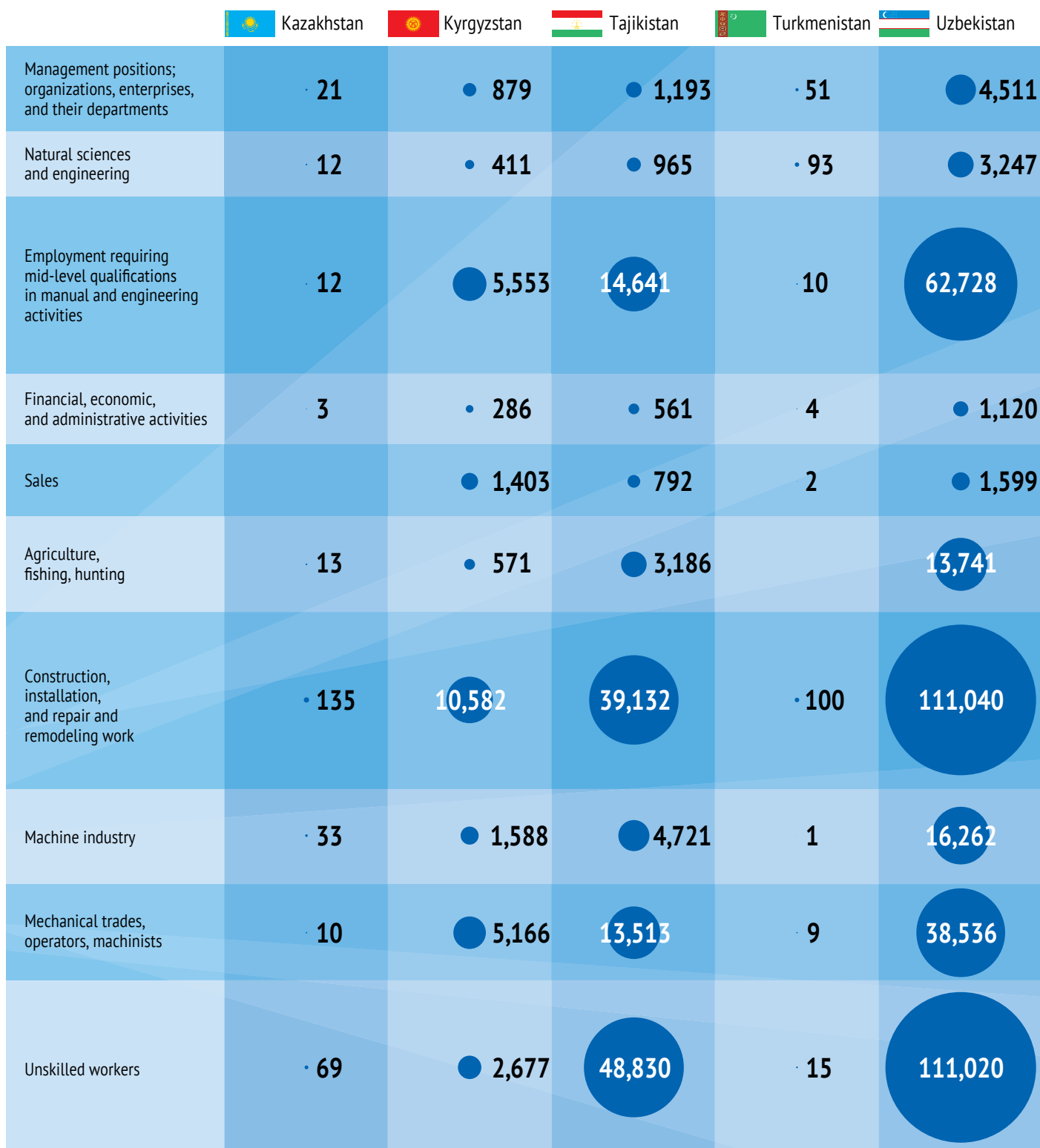


Source: Central Bank of Russia

See also <http://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics>

## DISTRIBUTION OF FOREIGN WORKERS

Engaged in legal labor activity in Russia in 2015, by main areas of economic activity



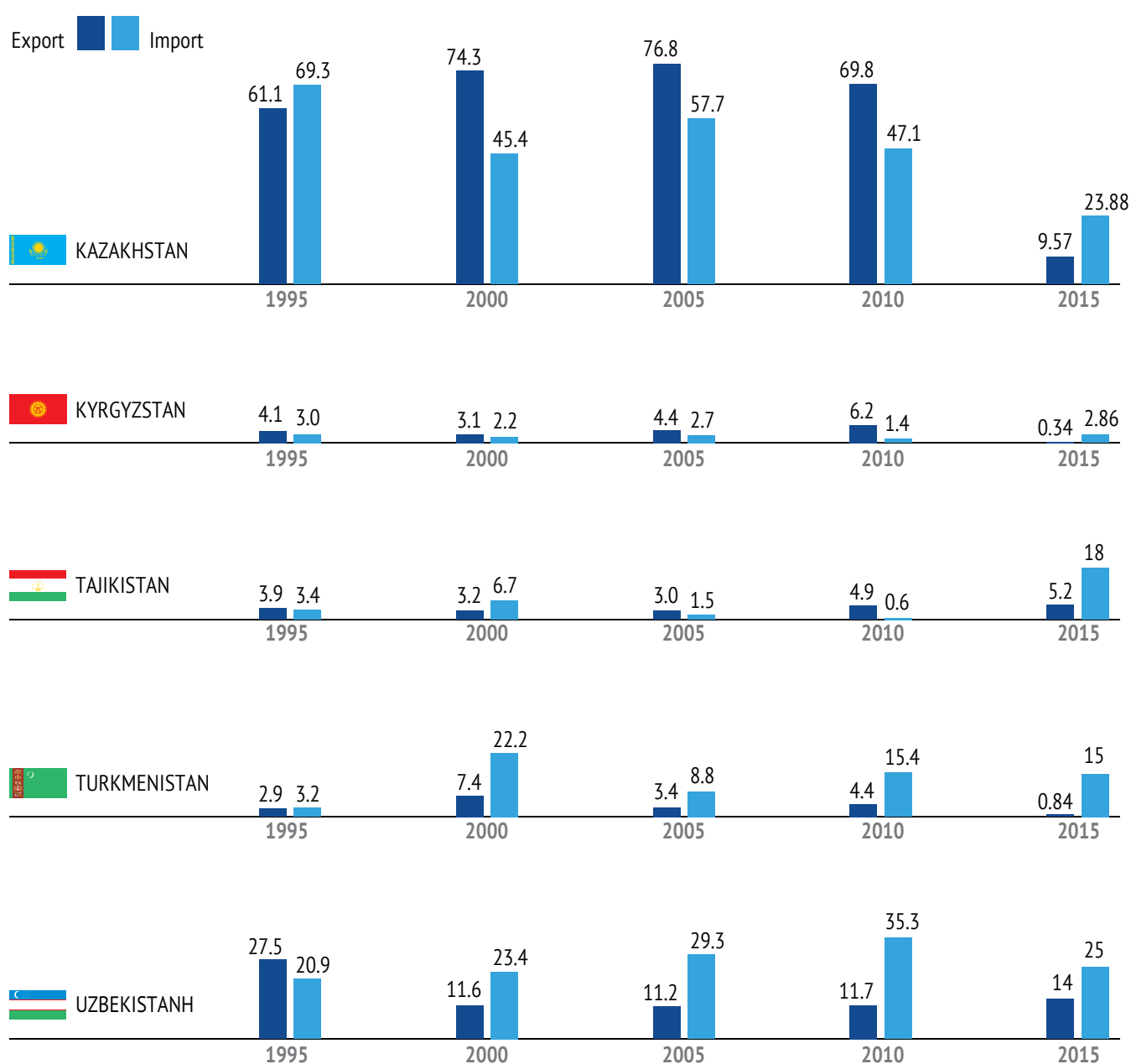
Source: Russian Federal State Statistics Service

 See also <http://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics>

The EEU has proven an important tool in recent years for regulating that interdependence. Russia should welcome economic growth in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, including through the development of industrial

and transport and logistics projects involving Chinese investment. Among other things, that makes it possible to increase the volume of trade between EEU member countries – an important objective of the union’s functioning.

### TRADE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES, 1995-2015 (%)

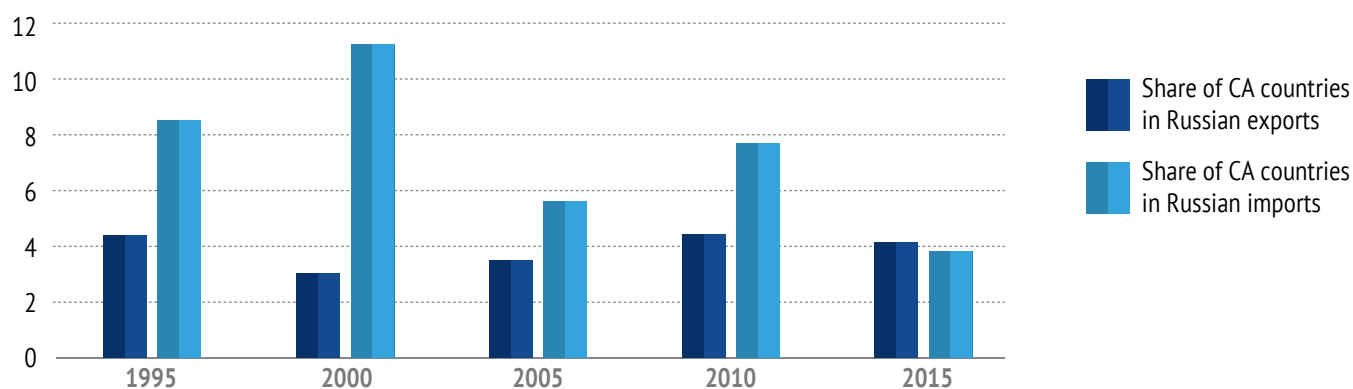


Source: Eurasian Economic Commission, Russian State Statistics Service, UNCTADStat data

See also <http://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics>



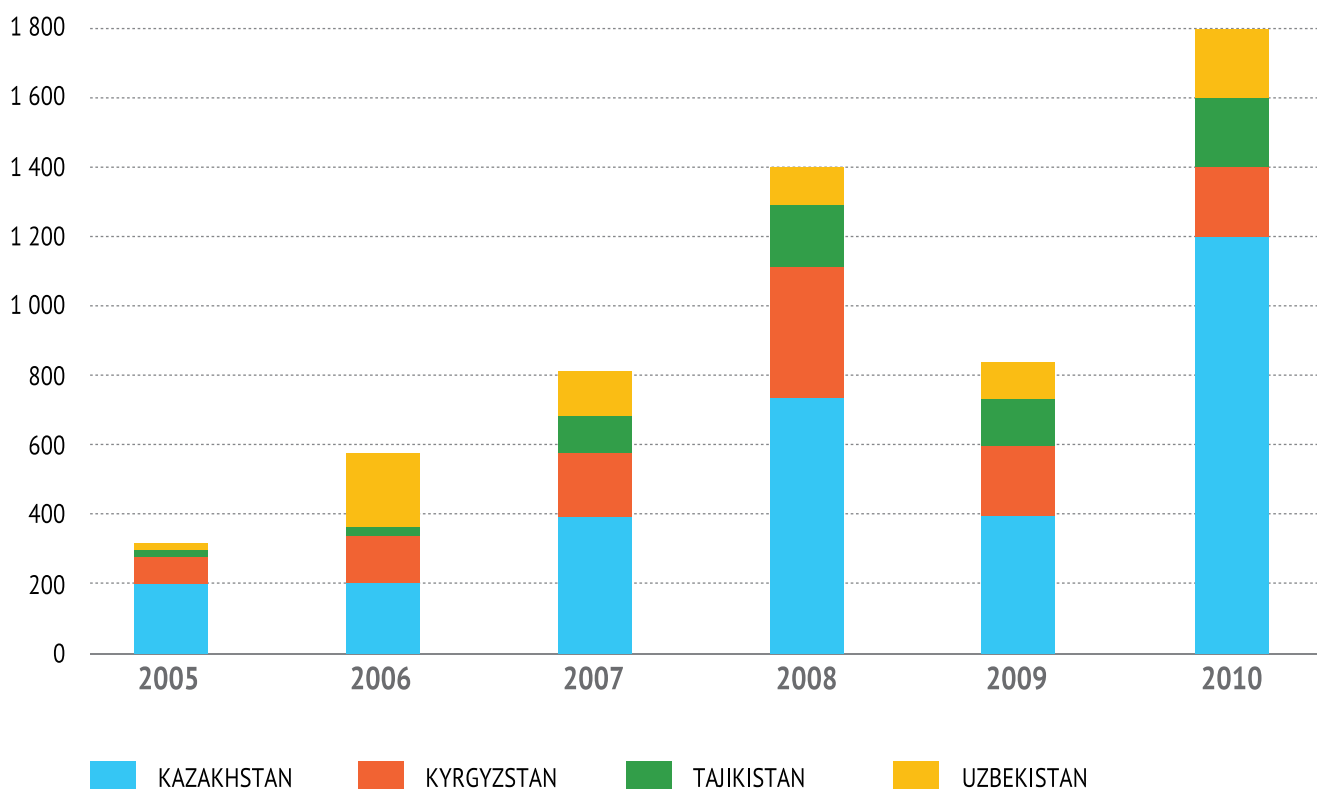
### THE SHARE OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN TRADE, 1995-2015 (%)



Source: <http://www.cisstat.com/>

See also <http://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics>

### RUSSIAN INVESTMENT IN CA COUNTRIES (MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)



Source: <http://www.cisstat.com/>

See also <http://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics>

## Areas of Cooperation

In the context of the global crisis, Central Asia faces serious threats from the rise of religious extremism, radicalism, and terrorist activity in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. The region is already dealing with problems caused by the aggravation of old security challenges, along with entirely new security concerns.

The old security challenges include, above all, the situation in Afghanistan, where crises continue to intensify. The most dangerous threat in this regard is the increased concentration of militants that began in 2014–2015 in northern Afghanistan near the borders of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Islamic State militants see Afghan territory as a base for expanding their influence in the Central Asian republics, and a number of Islamic State training centers are actively preparing militants who are native to CA and several regions of Russia. The Russian General Staff estimates that 2,000–3,000 Islamic State militants are currently located in Afghanistan, and that their number continues to grow.

The Islamic State is posing yet another threat from the direction of the Middle East. Brookings Institution experts estimate that 500 natives of Uzbekistan, 360 of Turkmenistan, 350 of Kyrgyzstan, 250 of Kazakhstan, and 190 of Tajikistan have joined the fighting in Syria and Iraq. The most recent estimates, based on data from CSTO authorities, indicate that more than 10,000 citizens of Russia, Central Asia, and western China have joined the ranks of international terrorists. Radical Islam in Afghanistan and the Middle East increasingly poses a threat to security in Central Asia. The region has traditionally been a “breeding ground” for the new type of radical terrorist groups ideology. In addition, serious interstate conflicts over water resources in the region greatly hamper cooperation on a wide range of issues. Moreover, the sharp fall in global commodity prices and the resulting economic crisis – that has become

especially acute due to mutual Western and Russian sanctions – has contributed to the worsening of the situation in the region.

All of this underscores the need for outside powers to assist the Central Asian states to meet the global challenges facing them. It is clear they cannot manage this task without the help of major systemic players such as Russia, the United States, and China. In fact, recent world history has repeatedly demonstrated that no country can cope with today’s security threats single-handedly. Russia, China, and the U.S. are all vitally interested in the struggle against the “forces of evil” and the whole range of cross-border threats in Central Asia: drug trafficking, organized crime, the intensification of uncontrolled migration, etc.

In this regard, the authors consider it necessary to **create a common peacekeeping platform to combat terrorist groups without linking this cooperation to other issues of the powers’ trilateral relations.** The implementation of such a project seems entirely realistic considering their previous experience of cooperation in this area. For example, after September 11, 2001, the U.S. and Russia cooperated successfully in Central Asia, China, and Russia within the framework of the SCO. Such experience is very valuable because it demonstrates that the countries are willing to compromise in areas in which they have shared values. That can serve as the basis for further cooperation on, for example, demonstrating respect for the diversity of civilizations and cultures, work for the peace and stability of mankind, the fight against inhuman acts, etc.

Although the authors favor a political solution to this problem, we nevertheless acknowledge the possibility that military force might be needed, especially given the current situation in areas near Central Asia and in the Middle East. As the main centers of global power, Russia, China, and the U.S. must take greater

responsibility for the smaller countries. The creation of such a platform for cooperation is therefore not only necessary, but satisfies the common interests of all three powers.

In terms of content, **the “common peacekeeping platform” could include joint peacekeeping operations such as the prevention of armed conflict and peace implementation, crisis settlement, operations for maintaining the peace, peace-building and the responsibility to protect.** Such operations would focus on the fight against extremism and radical ideologies in the region, the settlement of regional conflicts, the resolution of disagreements between Central Asian states, and on regional security in general. The potential of the SCO and CSTO as tools for managing such issues has yet to develop fully, and it is still too early to assess the recently begun active cooperation between China, the U.S., Pakistan, and Afghanistan regarding the problems of the latter. Thus, a common peacekeeping platform could lay the foundation for creating an institution of transnational political interaction between Russia, China, and the U.S. that would ensure timely dialogue and fruitful cooperation.

With regard to Afghanistan as a field for cooperation, a broader agenda is needed – namely, the restoration of peace, support of the Afghan government, and the establishment of the long-term stability of the state. China, Russia, and the United States should all invest in the future of Afghanistan.

The three powers could also cooperate with the goal of preserving the integrity of the region and the political stability of the Central Asian states. Preserving the historically close political, economic, and cultural ties between Russia and the countries of the region helps preserve the integrity and stability of the region as a whole. The high degree of economic interdependence between the countries of the former Soviet Union contributed

to the creation of a common infrastructure and industrial space, the spread of the Russian language as a tool of international communication, and the formation of a shared cultural space. These factors provide the basis for integration and enduring cooperation in the economic, security, and humanitarian fields. In that way, the countries of Central Asia can avoid the threat of marginalization while strengthening their role in influencing regional and international affairs. The general desire to strengthen regional integration as a means to counter external threats, overcome difficulties, and ensure economic growth suggests the possibility that such cooperation could extend over the long term.

It is important to note that the integrity and stability of Central Asia does not require that those governments be secretive and conservative. On the contrary, it suggests an open and pluralistic form of cooperation between the countries. Only in this way can China, Russia, and the U.S. interact productively in Central Asia.

As a relatively weak latecomer to the globalization process, Central Asia remains something of an enclave in comparison with other developed regions of the world. On one hand, that condition might increasingly push Central Asia into the periphery and widen the gap separating it from the leading countries of the modern world. On the other hand, it opens up opportunities for Central Asia to participate in global development. Whether this potential is properly valued or utilized depends not only on the policies of the Central Asian states, but also on their interaction with the major players – Russia, the U.S., China, and the European Union.

Situated at opposite ends of the Eurasian continent, Western Europe and East Asia enjoy relatively favorable conditions and opportunities for their own development. However, Central Eurasia, and particularly Central Asia, constantly face

numerous difficulties and problems due to adverse environmental conditions and the lack of direct access to foreign markets. If Central Asia gains opportunities for its all-round development, it will strengthen the individual countries as independent states and as active participants in the overall process of integration and globalization.

In this connection, economic interaction could serve as the third area of cooperation in Central Asia between Russia, China, and the U.S., although a certain degree of unspoken competition is inevitable. Such competition could motivate the three major powers to undertake joint projects for promoting the development of the regional economy and the creation of a trans-regional transport system, while looking at the region's integration into the global economy as a long-term goal. It is in these particular areas that the interests of the three major powers favorably coincide and lay the foundation for achieving overall balance. For example, Russia's strength lies in its history of close political, economic, and cultural ties with Central Asia; China brings significant financial and investment capabilities to the table; and the U.S. offers advanced technologies and innovations, along with rich administrative experience.

Speaking more globally, cooperation between China, Russia, and the U.S. could focus on creating **conditions for sustainable development** in the region, together with such international development institutions as the World Bank, the AIIB, BRICS, and the EDB. This could provide a good test of how ready the region is to become a platform for cooperation among a wide variety of players.

As a separate initiative, the countries could cooperate to provide **social services** to Central Asian countries in accordance with their specific needs. **Scientific cooperation** at the expert level for joint research and development projects is another important area of focus.

Along with studying the potential for economic cooperation in order to develop the necessary infrastructure in the region and a trans-regional transport system, it is necessary to gauge the effectiveness of the existing institutions of governance in the region. In this regard, the three major powers could consider the possibility of coordinating their activities to help create effective regional organizations and structures of governance.

As long as there are institutions and processes that involve all three parties, such as Heart of Asia, all the prerequisites exist for creating well-functioning institutions capable of resolving political differences and finding solutions to economic problems in the region. It is often more effective to engage at the regional than at the global level. For that reason, the three powers should work to create such formats for cooperation as, for example, the U.S.–SCO, an approach that, although functioning somewhat haphazardly at present, holds definite advantages in specific areas.

Thus, if the political will is present, Moscow, Beijing, and Washington would have much to gain by identifying common priorities in the region and cooperating to achieve them. Conversely, if tensions were to grow between China, Russia, and the U.S., it would only make Central Asia more fragmented, isolated, dangerous, and unmanageable and the countries in the region more vulnerable and unpredictable.

Despite the absence of any open confrontation between the three major powers, serious differences between them make it unlikely that they will engage in comprehensive and wide-ranging cooperation in Central Asia in the near future. Nonetheless, it is extremely important that they search for areas of potential cooperation in the region to help ensure a better future for Central Asia, and as a possible stepping-stone to improved relations between each other.



## #Valdaiclub



Valdai Club



Valdai International  
Discussion Club

[www.valdaiclub.com](http://www.valdaiclub.com)

[valdai@valdaiclub.com](mailto:valdai@valdaiclub.com)



Council on Foreign and Defense Policy



RIAC  
Russian International  
Affairs Council



MGIMO  
UNIVERSITY



NATIONAL RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY