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Can the US Play a Major Role in Central Asia?

By Loro Horta

SYNOPSIS

In late February, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to strengthen relations with Central Asia. With Russia facing increasing economic difficulties as a result of its ongoing war in Ukraine, Washington hopes to shore up its position in Moscow's backyard. On the other hand, China's influence among Central Asian elites has increased noticeably and this will complicate US diplomacy in the region.

COMMENTARY

The five nations of Central Asia, viz., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have had close ties with Russia since their independence and separation from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Russian companies have invested heavily in the region's energy sector and the Russian military has on occasion intervened to shore up local regimes. Such was the case in January 2022 when over 2,000 [Russian troops were deployed](#) to Kazakhstan following violent riots there.

However, as Russia faces severe economic difficulties and diplomatic isolation, these Central Asian nations are uneasy. The United States hopes to take advantage of Russia's weakness to gain diplomatic and economic benefits in this resource rich part of the world. In the past, Russia was a major obstacle to US influence in the region. However, well before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's influence in the region was already on the decline as [trade and investment shifted to China](#).

The Dragon Consolidates

While Russia's troubles may facilitate American penetration of the region, they do not count much in view of China's growing power. In the past decade or so, China's

economic and political influence in Central Asia have slowly but surely been eclipsing that of Russia.

In 2019, Chinese investments in Kazakhstan totaled US\$27.6 billion with more than half going to the oil and gas sectors. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, bilateral trade [reached US\\$31.2 billion](#) in 2022, which was 23.6 per cent higher than in the previous year. China shares a long border with Kazakhstan, the largest and wealthiest of the five Central Asian nations. As China's economy opens up and recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, one can expect trade and investment in Central Asia to expand rapidly.

China has also invested heavily in Turkmenistan's natural gas sector with that country being the single largest supplier of piped natural gas to China. In the first 11 months of 2022, Turkmen gas exports to China were [valued at US\\$9.3 billion](#), up from US\$6.79 billion in 2021. In September 2022, China and Uzbekistan signed deals worth US\$15 billion covering areas ranging from infrastructure to agriculture.

As China's economic influence grew, so did its political influence, with an ever-growing number of Central Asians studying in China. Kazakhstan's current [President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev](#) was educated in China and is fluent in mandarin. As such, China is well positioned to take over Russia's economic and political assets in the region. Russia's disastrous war in Ukraine benefits China far more than it benefits the US. However, these do not mean that Chinese power and influence in the region are free from challenges.

While elites in Central Asia for the most part have very positive views of China, anti-Chinese sentiment is quite high among the population as demonstrated by [several anti-Chinese riots](#) in Kazakhstan, the country where China has the biggest economic presence. The decline of Russian power, while opening new economic opportunities for China, also presents new challenges.

China has always avoided playing a major security role in the region, leaving that to Russia. During the January 2022 riots in Kazakhstan, China limited itself to offers of economic aid and diplomatic support. While Russia sent troops, China was the [purse](#). Now, however, Beijing cannot count on Russia sending troops should it be necessary to shore up local regimes.

Enter the Eagle

While China is the biggest beneficiary of Russia's military debacle in Ukraine, the United States with the right policies can make some inroads into the region. Central Asian elites are aware that their growing dependence on China decreases their leverage in relation to Beijing. With Russia severely weakened, the US is an attractive and necessary alternative to China. More than ever, Central Asian leaders need to find a balancer to China. If Washington works with its allies like the European Union and Japan, whose presence in the region are growing, it will improve its odds.

Central Asian elites know that anti-Chinese sentiment is strong among the populace. Hence, too much of a dependence on China can be risky. China's hard power is strong in the region, but its soft power is rather weak. The US on the other hand is generally

viewed in a positive light. It does not share a border with the region and US cultural appeal is strong, especially among the youth. While China may have won over the elites in the Central Asian states, the US may win over the coming generation of leaders. But it behooves the US treating the region with consistency and respect and not in an opportunistic way aimed at countering its global rivals.

Loro Horta is an academic and diplomat from Timor Leste. He was formerly Ambassador of Timor Leste to Cuba and Counselor at its Embassy in China. He worked for the UN in Turkmenistan and had traveled widely in Central Asia. He is currently an advisor to the Timor Leste government and Director of the Human Rights Centre at Timor Leste National University (UNTL). The views expressed here are strictly his own.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg