

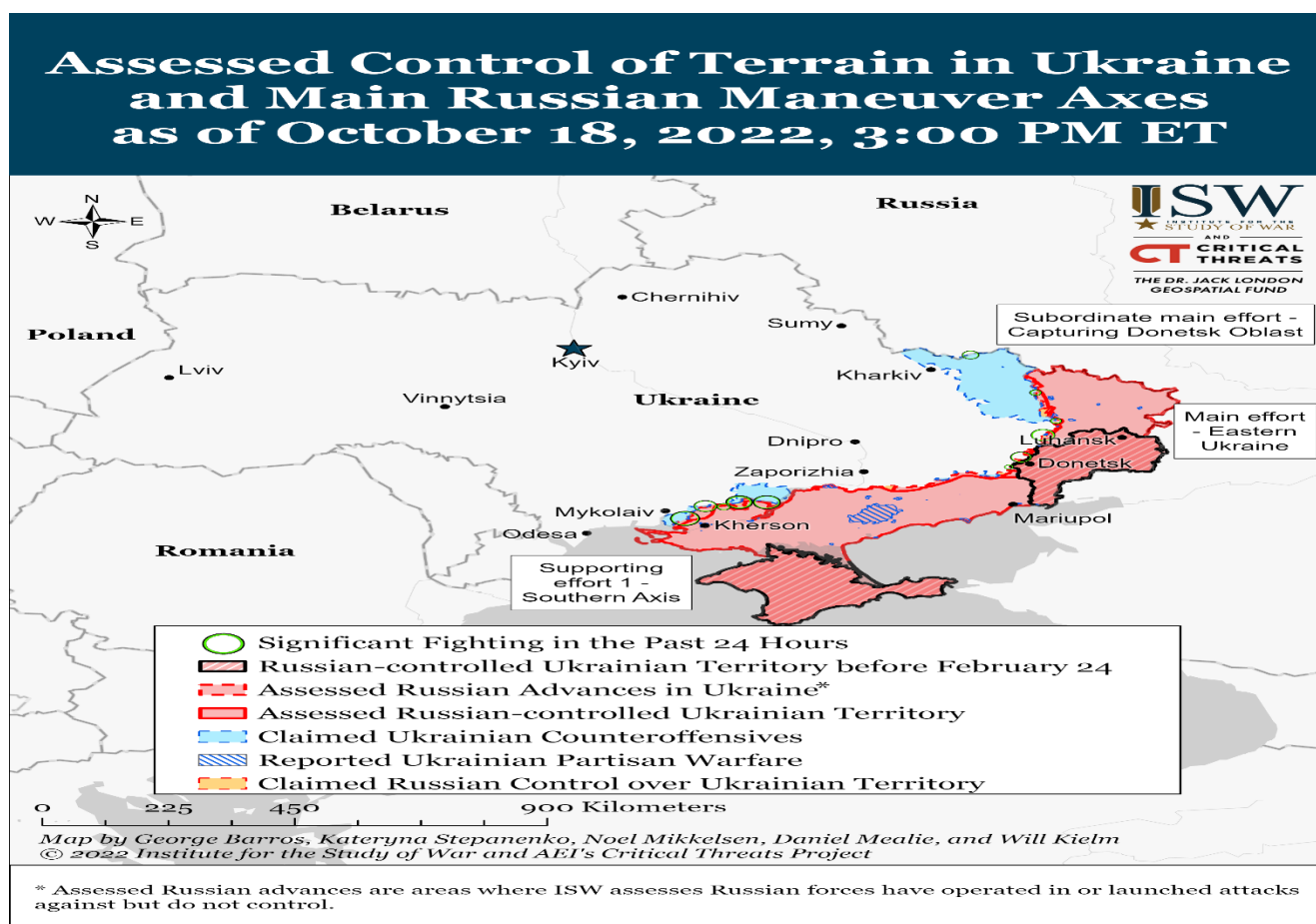


**Joining the dots and making sense of the key geopolitical developments in Europe, Eurasia and MENA**

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**Key points:**

- 1) The War in Ukraine at Crossroads: Expansion vs. Containment?
  - 2) Turkiye's Quest for Wide Ranging Regional Influence: Geopolitical Limitations and Risks
  - 3) Geopolitics in Central Asia: Swinging towards "Chinese-styled" Regionalism?
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## 1) The War in Ukraine at Crossroads: Expansion vs. Containment?

In our [Issue 19, May-July 2022](#), we suggested that, by the end of this year, expansion or containment might be the most likely near-term outcomes of the Ukraine war. Expansion should be understood either territorial, beyond Ukraine's internationally recognized borders, or in intensity, including attacks against critical infrastructure and nuclear threats. Indeed, the Ukrainian end of summer offensive has been successful in recovering some of the Ukrainian territory lost this spring in the East and in the South, while pushing the occupant Russian forces on the back foot. More importantly, it has moved the war into a new, more dangerous stage, whereby the Russians have dug themselves into a defensive posture paired with a war of attrition waged against Ukrainian critical infrastructure. Their immediate aim is to reach a possible (winter) ceasefire.

On September 30, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed agreements illegally incorporating the Ukrainian oblasts of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson into the Russian Federation. Furthermore, he promised Moscow would "*defend our land with all the forces and resources we have*". Putin also hinted at a nuclear threat, while seeking to intimidate Ukraine and the West, as he sought to bring the territories that Russia has just seized under the Russian nuclear umbrella. He might have also aimed to raise the stakes of the war in the eyes of the Russian public, while selling a false feeling that this was not just his personal special military operation, but Russia's "ultimate survival" war. (<https://www.brookings.edu>) The latter aim might have been meant to justify a controversial "partial mobilization" of Russian army triggered on September 21 by the acute need for fresh military forces to shore up against Ukrainian autumn counter-offensive.

Experts have repeatedly warned against Kyiv, and Moscow being in essence deeply committed to winning at the expense of their adversaries, which would leave little room for compromise. The existing conflicting interests would explain why so many outsider observers believed that a negotiated settlement would be impossible any time soon and have foreseen an upcoming bloody stalemate. (J. Mearsheimer on <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>) President Volodymyr Zelensky responded the Russian annexation of the Ukrainian oblasts by announcing that Ukraine was applying for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization: *"We are taking our decisive step by signing Ukraine's application for accelerated accession to NATO"* international media quoted the presidential website. However, the secretary general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, was quick to caution that a decision about accepting new members should be taken by all 30 member countries by consensus, while also reminding that NATO's immediate focus was on continuing to provide military support to Ukraine. (<https://www.nytimes.com>)

From the Ukrainian perspective, this was a warning that, in the light of the latest illegal annexations, the potential peace deal almost agreed in Istanbul at the end of March was currently outdated, and that the parties were engulfed in warfighting more than ever before. On the other hand, counting on the providential role of NATO enlargement for solving key national security problems of non-NATO states, at times of war, has proved (again after Georgia in 2008) irrelevant.

At least two possible future developments might have a further escalation effect:

1. Russian threats to attack with nuclear weapons Ukrainian targets.
2. Belarusian hints that it might effectively join the warfighting.

While some could claim that they might be Russian ploys meant to suggest an imminent expansion of

the war beyond the Ukrainian borders in case the West didn't persuade Ukraine to agree on an unconditional ceasefire, if they were enacted, they would be very consequential for the further expansion of war.

Since the launch of the "special operation" in Ukraine, President Putin has alluded several times to the possible use of nuclear weapons. For example, in his September 30 address announcing the annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts to the Russian Federation he recalled the "precedent" created by U.S. nuclear attacks against Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of WWII, while implying that if the West continued to send weapons to Ukraine and refused to put pressure on Kyiv to agree to a solution that would satisfy Russia, he might resort to the nuclear option. He ended that statement with a bleak warning: *"This is not a bluff!"*.

In response, U.S. President Joe Biden and his senior officials warned against Moscow using any nuclear weapons in Ukraine, as this would radically change the strategic situation in the field. *"He [Putin] is not joking when he talks about the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons," Biden told donors. "I don't think there's any such thing as an ability to easily use a tactical nuclear weapon and not end up with Armageddon."* (<https://www.theguardian.com>)

However, American officials maintained "strategic ambiguity" on what exactly the U.S./Western reaction to a Russian nuclear attack in Ukraine might be, while experts have widely speculated over the available options: from limited conventional attacks against Russian nuclear capabilities to strategic nuclear war.

President Xi Jinping of China has also felt the need to weigh in efforts to prevent war turning nuclear as he said that the international community should *"jointly oppose the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons"* in the context of his latest call for peaceful negotiations between Russia and Ukraine on November 4. (<https://worldview.stratfor.com>)

Would his call introduce a new redline in the China-Russia “no limits” partnership? This is obviously to be seen in the coming months.

Leaving aside the most combustible pros- and cons- of Russia going nuclear in Ukraine, one critical question remains hanging in the air: *“What happens when Russian forces fail to defeat the Ukrainians, the West increases its military aid and demonstratively ignores Putin's blackmail, and people in the new territories continue to resist their Russian occupiers, targeting senior officials and administrative buildings in terrorist attacks?”* (T. Stanovaya on <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>)

On October 13, President Alexander Lukashenko declared the launch of a new “counter-terrorist operation” in Belarus. He had come to this conclusion after his meetings with Belarus' intelligence authorities, where he would have received information that neighbouring NATO countries were planning “provocations” and that Ukraine was allegedly planning an invasion of Belarus. Consequently, he announced the deployment of a “joint military grouping with Russian forces” on the Belarus border with Ukraine. Subsequently, international media reported over what this latest statement of the Belarusian president might have meant: a verbal tactic to distract Ukrainian forces from their ongoing counter-offensives; a cover for the deployment of more Russian aircraft, missile brigades and drones in Belarus; a safeguard for a future escalation of the conflict for fear of future NATO involvement; an actual preparation by Russia to re-open Ukraine's Northern front. (<https://www.intellinews.com>) Irrespective of what were Lukashenko's real drivers to make this unprecedented decision, having the Belarusian forces directly involved in Russian combat against Ukraine might engender the expansion of the war, at the very least, towards NATO members Poland and the Baltic states. Such an eventuality should not be taken lightly as Western claims that it should be exclusively up to

Ukraine to negotiate the conditions of peace could sound hollow, if not rather reckless. This would be even more so as long as, in the wake of the illegal annexations of four Ukrainian oblasts, President Zelensky has issued ill-thought legislation preventing peace talks with President Putin.

Absent a meaningful international diplomatic process, the war in Ukraine could be easily escalated because of potential fears or misperceptions. Differences should have been settled before the war started. For now, we can only hope that the catastrophic expansion of this war is to be somehow contained. This is probably why ever more expert voices are speaking in favour of the imperative need for international diplomatic engagement with Russia and Ukraine on how to put the brakes on further escalating this war: *“Talking will not necessarily end the war but it will end the killing. It will not restore all of Ukraine's sovereignty, but it will keep it on track without growing costs that may soon prove irreversible and unbearable for all.”* (S. Serfaty on <https://nationalinterest.org>)

Sadly, there are no realistic solutions to the Ukraine war in sight. The ensuing geopolitical conflict may only be solved on a medium term within a wider Euro-Atlantic strategic context. For now, containing and “softening”, as much as possible, warfighting in Ukraine would be the best Western strategy to prevent any further expansion of the war in Ukraine.

## 2) Türkiye's Quest for Wide Ranging Regional Influence: Geopolitical Limitations and Risks

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye has turned its “walk on a tight rope between Russia and the West” into a crucial Ukraine-Russia mediation without fully cutting its political and military support to Kyiv. While largely motivated by self-interest this shift has further raised Ankara's regional power profile in the Wider Black Sea region, and not only.

In that vein, the most resounding success has been

the conclusion of a grains export deal, known as the “Black Sea Initiative”, mediated jointly with the U.N., and signed last July in Istanbul. This deal has ensured that Ukrainian grain was safely transported through the Black Sea and organised by a control centre in Istanbul consisting of U.N., Turkish, Russian and Ukrainian officials. It unblocked millions of tonnes of grain which had been trapped in Ukraine by the Russian Black Sea naval blockade since the start of the war. The agreement assuaged fears of a global food crisis, as grain prices soared and some of the world’s poorest countries faced a critical lack of food imports.

(<https://www.intellinews.com>)

International experts have widely acknowledged and explained Turkish mediation on punctual issues stemming from the war in Ukraine. Such successful mediation is unique given that Türkiye has largely backed NATO’s defence countermeasures, while declining to join Western sanctions against Russia, and has accelerated its own political and military support to Ukraine. For example, I. Kusa, an Ukrainian expert, acknowledged that *“for the foreseeable future, Turkey will remain an indispensable intermediary in the Ukraine–Russia–West triangle—simply because no one else managed to play this nearly hopeless role more successfully and produce any deliverables.”*

(<https://carnegieendowment.org>) Moreover, when Russia suspended its participation in the deal in the wake of an Ukrainian attack against Russian navy in Sevastopol, it took President Erdogan only two days to get Russia to return to the agreement and abandon the idea of blocking the export of Ukrainian grain: *“The speed of this reversal shows just how much Ankara’s influence on Moscow has grown in the last eight months, drastically shifting the relationship balance in Turkey’s favour”* (A. Prokopenko on <https://carnegieendowment.org>). This Turkish shift from apparent neutrality to carefully counterbalancing Russia has been argued for by S. Kardas, a well-known Turkish analyst:

*“Turkey’s response to the conflict [over Donbas, a.n.] so far has expanded the scope of its counterbalancing in the region. It has been careful to preserve its ties with Russia and the precarious order in the Black Sea”. The same analyst farther explained Turkish boundaries in counterbalancing Russia: “Turkey focuses on its areas of converging interests with the United States because, like all other actors, its main strategic puzzle is whether Russia will go beyond Ukraine and deeper in their shared neighbourhood.” However, a weakened Russia might also lead to instability in Türkiye’s neighbourhoods, stretching from the Wider Black Sea to the Middle East, and Central Asia. Therefore, “while practicing cautious balancing, it is in Turkey’s interest to extend a helping hand to Russia and maintain a prudent and responsible relationship with it”.* (<https://www.gmfus.org>)

Turkish foreign activism -an expression of its quest for wide ranging regional influence- has not been limited to the Wider Black Sea region, but it has involved extensive policy shifts aiming to put Ankara at the centre of regional diplomacy also in its Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods. This renewed wide ranging Turkish foreign activism has not come as a surprise, nor has it been driven exclusively by socio-economic considerations, and by the political-electoral interests of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (I. Lesser on <https://www.gmfus.org>). In a previous [issue](#), we have also noticed it: *“In the wake of the war on Nagorno-Karabakh in the fall of 2020, Turkey’s growing regional influence in the Caucasus, and closer Turkish-Azerbaijani relations [...] might have created the premises of a foreign policy pivot away from the MENA region to the South Caucasus and Central Asia. [...] Nevertheless, Turkey’s complete retrenchment from the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean regions is highly unlikely.”* This geopolitical trend has continued over the last couple of years, and it has been further strengthened by the geopolitical consequences of



the war in Ukraine.

For example, jointly with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, Ankara has intensified efforts to operationalize the Middle Transport Corridor across the Caspian Sea as an alternative route between China and Europe, given the inoperability (due to the war in Ukraine) of the Northern Transport Corridor via Russia. In addition, building upon its ethnic and religious ties, Ankara has increasingly used the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States to strengthen political and economic relations with Turkic Central Asian member countries. Recently established enhanced/comprehensive strategic partnerships with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respectively, have transformed Türkiye, along with Russia and China into one of the most important actors in the region. (<https://www.jamestown.org>)

From a geopolitical perspective, all Central Asian Turkic states (also including Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan) are seeking to build new bearings for balancing their excessive dependence on an increasingly neo-imperial Russia. They have also seen Türkiye (and Azerbaijan) as a key bridge to expand trade, investment, and energy links with Europe at a time of acute Russia-West confrontation, while striving to prevent Moscow to interfere and weaponize transit through its territory.

In the same vein, Türkiye has recently expanded its geopolitical leverage by restoring relations with key regional actors: Israel, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In the opinion of international experts, this has been a realignment of Turkish foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf regions aiming to strengthen its ability to actively participate in counterbalancing Iranian and Russian regional influences.

The return of normal diplomatic ties with Israel should not be viewed as a threat to the security of Greece and Cyprus, and it was actually meant to help lower Eastern Mediterranean tensions and end

Ankara's regional isolation on competitive territorial claims on access to energy projects. Meanwhile, Riyadh is probably viewing this rapprochement as the restoration of a transactional relationship that has the potential to benefit both Ankara and Riyadh. It is therefore not *"a coincidence that this rapprochement is happening at a time when Turkey-Iran tensions are growing both in Iraq and Syria. Turkey's role in different regional conflicts over the last decade—in Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine—demonstrates the counterbalance that Turkey, along with other regional countries, can provide against Iranian influence."* (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>)

In conclusion, having successfully played a balancing role in the Wider Black Sea region, Türkiye is now seeking a similar play in Central Asia and the Middle East. Although slightly opportunistic, current Turkish foreign activism might lead into forging a pivotal regional role for Türkiye while strengthening Ankara's regional influence, and boosting its leverage in relations with global, regional, and local players.

However, there are serious limitations and risks possibly interfering with Ankara's current regional influence expansion plans. First and foremost, the precarious economic situation, and the ensuing political and social instability could affect Türkiye's regional power credibility, and its practical ability to exert influence and implicitly take advantage of ensuing benefits. Second, being surrounded by regional turmoil there aren't many options for not being engulfed by them. Straddling conflicts while simultaneously being involved in them might backfire, and eventually force Ankara to choose sides. Third, the prevailing transactional/mercenary relations with the West (including with NATO, the U.S., and the E.U.), as well as with China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, and others could occasionally create serious contradictions and conflicts of interests. On the medium and longer term, the sharpening of the global competition for

power, might force Ankara to make difficult, unwanted choices, which might significantly limit or even question Türkiye's regional influence. For example, in case NATO and Russia would engage in a direct military confrontation how would Ankara square its NATO membership commitments with maintaining a prudent and responsible relationship with Russia in the Wider Black Sea? Therefore, persisting ambiguities in Turkish regional policies are leaving plenty of space for manoeuvre to third powers, including Turkey's main regional competitors, such as Iran, Russia, and China.

### 3) Geopolitics in Central Asia: Swinging towards "Chinese-styled" Regionalism?

In our [Issue 14/April-May 2021](#) we have warned on the high risk for post-Western Afghanistan to drive a "geopolitical vacuum" at the "heart of Asia". In that context, we were wondering how geopolitical change in Central Asia might impact the interests and strategies of regional powers China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, India and Pakistan as they might feel emboldened to fill in the emerging "geopolitical vacuum". More specifically, would they be willing and able to establish a kind of Consortium, possibly under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization- SCO, to help Afghanistan leverage its geo-economic potential as a bridge, and to organize effective regional cooperation involving the Central Asian republics? Obviously, given the Chinese ambitions to leverage its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the backbone of this structural geopolitical transformation in Central Asia we could equate it with building "Chinese-styled" regionalism.

From this perspective, the annual SCO summit, held in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) on 15-16 September, as well as the high-level bilateral meetings preceding it (or taking place in its margins) have been most revealing for a snap geopolitical re-assessment. The summit not only brought together the leaders of all relevant actors: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and

Uzbekistan as member states; Türkiye and Azerbaijan as dialogue partners; and Iran (which has joined the organization as new member), Mongolia, and Belarus as observer states. The President of Turkmenistan was also invited as a special guest by the host country.



From [https://wikitravel.org/en/Central\\_Asia](https://wikitravel.org/en/Central_Asia)

It has also proved SCO's shifting scope and growing relevance not only for Central Asia but also for strengthening links with South Asian and Middle Eastern states. The big absent from the summit was Afghanistan, which wasn't invited to attend, although it held observer status. This means the Taliban-led government in Kabul still needs to persuade each and every SCO member that it is committed to transform itself into a predictable, and responsible regional actor.

Supporters of the SCO have underscored the achievements of the summit: it confirmed the potential for expansion of the organization and a growing interest for cooperation with it (Belarus and Türkiye announced their interest to join as full members, while several others -in particular from the Middle East- were confirmed as new dialogue partners); as the Samarkand summit demonstrated the importance of this region in the geopolitical games of regional powers it has also proved Central Asia has become the geopolitical core of the SCO; it

provided a platform for the leaders to discuss essential issues bilaterally, trilaterally, and multilaterally; it focused on economic cooperation and connectivity, while calling for the expansion of the capacity of economic cooperation, trade, and investment, including by taking full advantage of the Chinese BRI and considering a Greater Eurasian Partnership with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and A.S.E.A.N.. In this vein, the summit endorsed new working groups, several joint statements, and action plans, and an agreement between China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to build a rail link from Kashi to Andijan; the worrying situation in Afghanistan was also thoroughly discussed, as Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed to establish a special fund for humanitarian support. In conclusion: *“SCO is shifting towards economic cooperation rather than promoting its initial regional security agenda. For Central Asian states, being in the geographical core of SCO while squeezed between sanctioned Russia and assertive China, a growing interest in SCO could lead to positive outcomes. Transportation and infrastructure projects might be one such field that gains from current changes.”*

(<https://www.eurasian-research.org>)

Meanwhile, SCO-sceptics criticized: the key role plaid in the organization by China, Russia, and Iran, who would like to revise the global system without being able to propose a positive agenda for it; the summit's failure to effectively address regional crises (such as Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan, major floods in Pakistan), and the inability to deal with the food and energy deprivation of some member states due to Western sanctions imposed against Russia (sic). They argued the SCO's summit agenda was clumsy and insubstantial, while suspicions for the SCO would be hiddenly aiming to compete with the G7 or to potentially replace the G20, and disappointment with its incongruence with the U.S./ Western agenda were blatant. (<https://usrussiaaccord.org>)

The Samarkand summit was also welcome for it facilitated bilateral meetings among leaders, most importantly between presidents Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin, or the Indian Prime-Minister Narendra Modi and the Russian president.

The meeting of the former highlighted that while the Chinese and Russian leaders did not see eye to eye on international developments, and in particular on the global consequences of the Russian war against Ukraine, their ties remained steady and firm. President Xi said that China was willing to work with Russia to *“demonstrate the responsibility of a major country to play a leading role and inject stability into a turbulent world”*, and that China would support Russia's core interests — which include Ukraine. In response, President Putin said *“We highly value the balanced position of our Chinese friends regarding the Ukrainian crisis, we understand your questions and concerns on this matter, and during today's meeting we will of course clarify all of these in detail.”* (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

However, international experts have also noted that, despite those apparently friendly statements, Russia's debilitation in the course of the Ukraine war inevitably weakened its positions in Central Asia, and that China might become concerned about Moscow's inability to perform the role of security provider in this conflict-rich region. *“Xi Jinping probably regrets his commitment to a “partnership without limits” with Putin, if only because the Chinese president himself has drawn some exceedingly firm limits on granting symbolic rather than material help to Beijing's “partner in need.” Xi does not want to see Russia's defeat and Putin's inglorious exit, but he neither fancies to ally with a loser nor anchor China to a sinking ship.”* (<https://www.jamestown.org>). In practice, this means that the balance of power between China and Russia in Central Asia is shifting, while Moscow's loss of regional influence and credibility as a key security guarantor are gradually leading to



Beijing increasingly backing its key economic and financial regional role with fresh security guarantees and security assistance and support to Central Asian states. It is in this key we should understand the statements of President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan, just prior to the SCO summit, vowing to strongly support Kazakhstan's efforts to protect its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity *"no matter how the international situation changes"*. That has been a not so veiled allusion to the implications of Russian neo-imperialism in Ukraine for the prospects of Central Asian post-Soviet republics, in the context of Astana's most recent tensions with Moscow, possibly portending its slow drift away from Russia. Chinese President's offer at the summit to coordinate with SCO members on domestic security, law enforcement, and anti-terrorism, and the invitation to join its *"Global Security Initiative" (GSI)* should be read in the same note. Thereby *"China is signalling to Central Asian countries that it will not tolerate social unrest that threatens to destabilize the region by overthrowing governments and will intervene to prevent it. The GSI is grounded in fundamental principles of China's foreign policy philosophy, and having countries sign on to it will further enhance Beijing's regional centrality and the credibility of its model as Russian influence over the region wanes"*. (<https://worldview.stratfor.com>).

Nevertheless, although Russian influence in Central Asia might have been seriously damaged by its neo-imperial ambitions in Ukraine, it has hardly completely disappeared. Russia remains a critical regional actor even if its clout and claims for regional primacy are being openly challenged by China (and Turkey). Others might be still waiting on the fence to see where the geopolitical winds in Central Asia are blowing. In essence, the SCO summit in Uzbekistan showcased China's shining development and security plans in Central Asia contrasting to Russia's defensive posture due to its wounded regional influence. This contrast might

somewhat mitigate SCO's political clout, but the organization is certainly growing more attractive for many Asians.

Meanwhile, Central Asian states are still searching for new geopolitical bearings to help them cope with the risk of ending up crushed in the geopolitical struggle precipitated by last year's Western withdrawal from Afghanistan. Kazakhstan is a typical example for how Central Asians are shifting gears to using Chinese power to counter Russian entrenched Eurasian-ist instincts.

As we have predicted already since last year, in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, a West-less balance of power is in the making in Central Asia. And the SCO might be the key instrument for driving this change. However, the jury is still out on whether the current geopolitical trend to have regional powers cooperatively harmonizing their interests around existing and future geopolitical, socio-economic, security and cultural challenges will deepen or fade away.



### About EGF

The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) was established in early 2010 by several independently minded practitioners of European geopolitics, who saw a certain vacuum in the information flow leading into the European geopolitical discussion. EGF is dedicated, therefore, towards the promotion of an objective, Pan-European geopolitical debate incorporating the views of Wider-European opinion shapers rather than simply those from the mainstream European Union (EU) member states. EGF seeks to elaborate upon European decision makers' and other relevant stakeholders' appreciation of European geopolitics by encouraging and effectively expanding the information flow from east to west, from south to north. In order to achieve these objectives, the European Geopolitical Forum was established as an independent internet-based resource, a web-portal which aims to serve as a knowledge hub on Pan-European geopolitics. EGF's strength is in its unique ability to gather a wide range of affiliated experts, the majority of whom originate from the countries in the EU's external neighbourhood, to examine and debate core issues in the Wider-European geopolitical context. Exchange of positions and interactivity between east and west, south and north, is at the heart of the EGF project. Please visit our website for further information at [www.gpf-europe.com](http://www.gpf-europe.com).

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