

Russian Federation's Military Policy in Central Asia in the XXI Century

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to comprehensively analyze Russia's military policy in Central Asia from 2000 to February 2022. Additionally, the study tests the hypothesis that the growth of Russia's material power and the strengthening of its position in the international arena will lead Moscow to seek dominance in the region, including in the military sphere. The author considers the geopolitical position of the Russian Federation at the beginning of the XXI century and after 2013, enabling an analysis of the relationship between Moscow's position in the international arena and its policies in Central Asia. Special attention is given to analyzing the measures through which Moscow strengthens its influence in the region. The author highlights the following measures used by the Russian Federation: maintaining and strengthening its military infrastructure in the region, increasing arms exports to Central Asian states, increasing the number of bilateral and multilateral military exercises, expanding cooperation between the Russian military-industrial complex and counterparts in the countries of the region, creating joint air defense systems with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, providing free education in Russian military institutes for military personnel from Central Asia, and developing CSTO collective forces. The conclusions state that, due to its growing material power and more active foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, Russia has re-emerged as a leading security partner for Central Asian states.

Keywords

Russia, military policy, Central Asia, CSTO collective forces, arms transfers, military drills

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the distribution of power in the international system underwent profound changes. The territories of the former Soviet republics ceased to be under Moscow's unconditional dominance. Simultaneously, rivalry for influence among external actors began in Central Asia. The leaders of the newly independent states pursued their own foreign policies, which did not always prioritize close ties with Moscow. As a result of these changes, Russia's position in the region weakened during the 1990s. By the early XXI century, Russian authorities were compelled to revise their strategy toward Central Asian states. Without significant changes to Russia's foreign policy approach, Moscow risked being sidelined in the region by more assertive external players.

In this study, the author utilizes offensive neorealism, which posits that the primary goal of a great state is survival. States pay close attention to the distribution of power in the international arena and seek opportunities to shift the balance of power in their favor. The most powerful states strive to achieve regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001). For example, the United States became the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere at the end of the XIX century and

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continues to hold this status in the XXI century. To achieve their goals, countries employ a wide range of political, economic, and military means. It should be noted that, with a few exceptions (Klein, 2019; Peyrouse, 2011, 2019), there are no works in the scientific literature dedicated to a comprehensive study of Russia's military policy in Central Asia in the XXI century.

Geopolitical Position of Russia at the Beginning of the XXI Century

In 2000, Vladimir Putin became the new president of the Russian Federation. The new Russian leader understood that, after the radical weakening of the Russian state in the 1990s, Moscow could not act as an equal partner to Washington and could not position itself as one of two global power centers. Russia's prospects at that time looked bleak, considering that in 2000 its GDP was USD 0.26 trillion compared to USD 10.25 trillion in the United States, and its military spending was USD 9.2 billion compared to the USD 320 billion spent by the United States (SIPRI, 2024). In his first address to the citizens of Russia, Putin expressed concern about the current state of affairs: "For the first time in the past 200–300 years, Russia is facing a real threat of sliding to the second, and possibly even third, echelon of world states" (Timmermann, 2003, p. 92).

Some American experts expressed similar assessments. Thomas Graham, a senior U.S. State Department official, wrote in 1999 that, in the post-Soviet period, Russia had transformed into a "deindustrialized economy," its military was "on the verge of ruin," and the country had "lost its sense of identity and purpose" (Graham, 1999). Moreover, Graham believed that Russia's decline "may be permanent." He argued that the present state of affairs "behooves us to think through seriously and systematically the possibility of a world without Russia." Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, noted that "Russia is no longer an imperial power, and the most important challenge for it, if it does not want to lose its Far Eastern areas to China, is social and economic reconstruction" (Brzezinski, 2004, p. 19).

In the early years of the new president's rule, Russian foreign policy priorities did not undergo significant changes. At the beginning of the XXI century, Moscow continued to reduce its military presence abroad. In 2001, in accordance with the decision of the Russian president, the Russian military contingent withdrew from the Cam Ranh base in Vietnam. In 2003, the Russian peacekeeping forces finally left Kosovo, leaving only NATO soldiers there. Additionally, Moscow closed down the Lourdes eavesdropping facility in Cuba, which had allowed interception of data from American communications satellites, military ships, and telephone conversations.

The most important strategic issue for Russia was NATO's eastward expansion. In 1999 and 2004, ten countries

from Central and Southern Europe joined NATO. Most troubling for Moscow was the fact that three former Soviet republics—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which share borders with Russia—became new members of the Alliance. In June 1998, Zbigniew Brzezinski visited Kiev, where he conveyed the message that Ukraine should prepare itself to join NATO by 2010 (Waltz, 2000, p. 30). It became clear that Washington's actions were aimed at preventing Russia from occupying a dominant position in the post-Soviet space. As noted by American political scientist Randall Schweller, NATO's goal in the modern world, as well as during the Cold War, is to "keep America in, Germany down, and Russia out" (Schweller, 2001, p. 182). NATO's eastward expansion had a negative impact on Moscow's relations with the West and contributed to the rapprochement between Russia and China.

Russia's Military Policy in Central Asia in 2000–2013

At the very beginning of President Putin's rule, Russia adopted a new National Security Strategy, Military Doctrine, and Foreign Policy Concept. Each of these documents emphasized the importance of comprehensive cooperation with post-Soviet countries for Russia's own security. Noteworthy is that, Moscow was particularly concerned about terrorist threats and the prospect of other countries deploying troops in neighboring nations, as this could lead to a significant weakening of Russia's position in the international arena. Consequently, the restoration of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, including Central Asia, became one of the main priorities of Putin's foreign policy.

Russia had particularly high potential for cooperation with the Central Asian states, as—unlike in the South Caucasus—none of these countries maintained conflictual relations with Moscow. Michael Slobodchikoff noted that Russia sought to establish a distinct regional order and employed sophisticated strategies to this end, such as nesting bilateral treaties within multilateral treaties (Slobodchikoff & Aleprete, 2021). From the perspective of Russia's geopolitical strategy, the Republic of Kazakhstan occupied a pivotal position in the region. It possessed substantial energy reserves and served as a crucial buffer zone, separating Russia from states that, during the 1990s, had experienced significant challenges related to Islamic extremism and terrorism (Slobodchikoff, 2014).

Despite Russia's negative attitude toward the strengthening of external actors in the post-Soviet space, it welcomed the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan in 2001 and did not prevent the deployment of U.S. military contingents in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Krickovic & Pellicciari, 2021). Russian political support and military assistance to the United States and its allies in Afghanistan was a rare example of strategic partnership between

Moscow and the West (Nikitin, 2008). This position can be explained by the fact that the U.S. military operation against the Taliban eliminated one of the most serious threats to the security of Central Asian states and Russia. It is worth noting that in 1999 and 2000, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan made two attempts to break into the Fergana Valley, which led to clashes between the government army and Islamic militants in southern Uzbekistan.

The position of the Russian Federation regarding the deployment of U.S. troops in the region began to change in 2003, when it became clear that American contingents might remain in Afghanistan and two Central Asian countries for an extended period. The Russian leadership feared that the United States might deploy air defense systems in Central Asia capable of destroying Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles during their boost phase (Lachowski, 2007). To weaken the United States' position in the region, Moscow employed various political instruments. For example, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Astana on July 5, 2005, member states called the United States to set a deadline for its military presence in Central Asia (Roy, 2014). Noteworthy is that Russia acted together with China to lend weight to the statement against the United States.

One of the most important instruments for the Russian Federation in strengthening its military and political positions in the post-Soviet space was the Collective Security Treaty (CST), which was transformed into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002. At the beginning of the XXI century, the organization included Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Notably, in 1999, three countries—Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan—left the CST. This, along with other strategic considerations, increased Russia's activity in the post-Soviet space; otherwise, Moscow risked losing almost all of its allies in the medium term.

Given the tense situation on the southern borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan established the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (CRDF) in 2001. The CRDF consisted of about 5,000 soldiers: three battalions each from Russia and Tajikistan, and four battalions from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These collective forces were intended to repel external aggression and conduct joint anti-terrorist operations. The Russian Federation is the largest contributor to the CSTO, and in the event of military actions, its collective forces would operate under a Russian commander (Allison, 2004). Noteworthy is that the CSTO United Staff is closely linked to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

In the first half of 2009, a new collective force, the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF), was established within the CSTO. The main tasks of the CRRF include participating in the prevention and repulsion of armed attacks; conducting operations to combat international

terrorism and illicit drug and weapons trafficking; reinforcing troops to protect state borders and key military and government facilities; and addressing the aftermath of emergency situations. The CRRF consists of 3,500 troops and approximately 14,500 police officers, emergency workers, and special agents (McDermott, 2012).

It is important to note that at the end of 2010, significant changes were made to the CSTO Charter. The charter included a paragraph establishing a response system for "emergency situations which threaten the security, stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty" of the member states. This change granted the CSTO the right to deploy the CRRF on the territory of a member state if its leadership requests assistance in a crisis situation, such as anti-government riots (Troitskiy & Zinoviev, 2018). Prior to this amendment, collective forces could only be used in cases of external aggression or natural disasters. It can be assumed that these changes were related to the ethnic riots that broke out in June 2010 in Osh, the second largest city in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Analyzing Russia's military strategy, it should be emphasized that Moscow has managed not only to retain control over a significant number of military facilities in Central Asian states but also to establish several new ones. Based on bilateral agreements, Russia continues to operate the following military facilities in Kazakhstan: (1) Baikonur Cosmodrome (Kyzylorda region), (2) Balkhash Radar Station (Karaganda region), (3) 5580th Test Base Emba (Aktobe region), (4) 20th Detached Test Station (West Kazakhstan region), (5) 929th Chkalov State Flight Test Center (West Kazakhstan and Atyrau regions), and (6) Sary Shagan Test Site (located in the Karaganda, Zhambyl, Aktobe, and Kyzylorda regions) (Paramonov & Stolpovskiy, 2009).

The Baikonur Cosmodrome consists of nine launch complexes, four missile testing grounds, at least 11 assembly facilities, numerous command and control centers and logistics groups. Several rocket systems for manned spaceflight, commercial, and military space launches are still operating at Baikonur, including the Zenit, Soyuz, Proton, Strela, and Dnepr rocket programs (Rogozińska & Olech, 2020). The Balkhash-9 station was used by Russia until 2020 to monitor missile systems in China, India, Pakistan, and the Indian Ocean. The Emba range is used for research and testing of anti-aircraft weapons, as well as for military exercises. The 20th station is used for testing missiles and ammunition, while the Sary Shagan range is used for testing missile defense systems (Bardina, 2022). The Chkalov Flight Test Center conducts tests of military aviation equipment and aircraft weapons.

Russia controls four military facilities on the territory of Kyrgyzstan: (1) the 999th Air Base Kant (Chüy region), (2) the 338th Naval Communications Facility "Marevo" (Chüy region), (3) the 954th Anti-Submarine Weapons Test Base of the Russian Navy "Lake" (eastern coast of Lake Issyk-Kul), and (4) the 17th Radio-Seismic Laboratory of the

seismographic service of the Russian Ministry of Defense (Rogozińska & Olech, 2020). The Kant Air Base was the first Russian military facility established on the territory of another country after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Notably, this base is located 30 km from Manas Airport, where U.S. troops were stationed from 2001 to 2014. It can be assumed that the new Russian base was created to counter the growing influence of the United States in the region. In this way, the Russian Federation demonstrated its determination to protect its interests in the post-Soviet space. The importance of the base is evidenced by the fact that the opening ceremony was attended by Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2012, about 750 soldiers and servicemen, as well as a few dozen airplanes and helicopters, were stationed at Kant Air Base (Bobokulov, 2012). In the event of an emergency, these aircraft will support the CSTO collective forces. The main task of the communications facility Marevo is to ensure communication between the Russian General Staff and surface and submarine ships on duty in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The test base Lake is used for testing anti-submarine weapons. The 17th Radio-Seismic Laboratory provides information on nuclear weapons tests in China and Southeast Asia (Paramonov & Stolpovskiy, 2009).

There are three Russian military facilities in Tajikistan: (1) the 201st Military Base (Dushanbe, Kulob, and Bokhtar), (2) the “Okno” Optical Electronic System for Space Monitoring (Khatlon region), and (3) the Ayni Air Base (Rogozińska & Olech, 2020). The 201st Military Base, established in 2004 after reorganizing the 201st Motor Rifle Division, is Russia’s largest military facility outside its borders, with approximately 7,000 personnel stationed there. The base’s headquarters are in Dushanbe, with the 191st Motor Rifle Regiment in Bokhtar, and the 149th Guards Motor Rifle Regiment in Kulob (Kutnaeva, 2010). Like the Kant Air Base, the 201st base is considered an important element of Russian-American rivalry in the post-Soviet space. Notably, according to the lease agreement signed in 2012, Russian troops can stay in Tajikistan until 2042.

The Okno system allows for the tracking and monitoring of space objects over Eurasia, Central and North Africa, and the Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans at altitudes between 2,000 and 40,000 km. Under the current agreement, Moscow can use the facility until 2053 (Kutnaeva, 2010). Since 2011, several Russian helicopters have been based at the Ayni Air Base near Dushanbe. Noteworthy is that India was also interested in operating the facility. However, at the beginning of the second decade of the XXI century, there were no Indian military personnel at the facility.

Another important element of Moscow’s military strategy is the export of Russian arms to Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan is the largest importer of Russian arms in the region. The following tables show the dynamics of the arms trade during the period covered in the first part of this paper.

Analyzing the data on sales of Russian weapons to Kazakhstan from 2000 to 2013, it should be noted that in 2000, the state company Rosoboronexport signed an agreement with Kazspecexport, defining the main directions of military-technical cooperation between the two countries (Rosoboronexport, 2023). In 2004, Moscow allowed Kazakhstan to buy Russian weapons at the domestic prices paid by the Russian military. As shown in Table 1, this agreement led to an increase in Russian arms exports. Astana began to buy not only Soviet-era equipment but also the latest Russian BPM-97 ambush-protected vehicles, Tigr infantry mobility vehicles, and Terminator armored fighting vehicles.

Uzbekistan could also import products of the Russian arms industry at domestic prices. Nevertheless, compared to Kazakhstan, it was far less active in the Russian arms market. This was primarily due to the fact that, at the beginning of the 1990s, Tashkent received a large quantity of equipment, weapons, and ammunition from Soviet units stationed in the Turkestan Military District. Additionally, Islam Karimov’s multi-vector foreign policy was based on balancing Russian, American, and Chinese geopolitical interests. According to data from the Kennan Institute, in the second decade of the XXI century, the People’s Republic of China became the main arms exporter to Uzbekistan

Table 1. Large Russian arms transfers to Kazakhstan in 2000–2013

Year of delivery	Number of delivered equipment	Equipment
2000	40	Surface-to-air missiles for the S-300 system
2004–2007; 2009–2012	26	Mi-8 MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters
2004–2005; 2007–2010	93	BTR-80A armored personal carriers
2008	18	BPM-97 wheeled mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles
2011	3	TOS-1 multiple rocket launchers
2011–2012	44	BTR-82A armored personal carriers
2011–2012	21	Tigr infantry mobility vehicles
2012	17	BTR-80 armored personal carriers
2011–2013	10	BMPT Terminator armored fighting vehicles

Source: authors’ own compilation based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

(Jardine & Lemon, 2020). From 1991 to 2018, Tashkent spent more on arms from China than from the Russian Federation. In this respect, Uzbekistan was very different from other Central Asian republics, which primarily bought arms from Russia.

Since the beginning of the XXI century, Russia has significantly increased the supply of arms to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Cooperation with Dushanbe and Bishkek had its own peculiarities: neither Tajikistan nor Kyrgyzstan paid anything for Russian armaments. In return, Russia did not pay rent for its military facilities on the territory of these states (Peyrouse, 2011). Noteworthy is that every year since 2005, Russia has provided Bishkek with military equipment worth USD 4.5 million. Moreover, in 2006, Moscow and Bishkek signed an agreement under which military and technical assistance amounting to over USD 27 million was provided to Kyrgyzstan from 2006 to 2008 (Paramonov & Stolpovskiy, 2009). Russian-Tajik cooperation looked very similar. In 2005–2006, Russia provided Tajikistan with military aid amounting to USD 26 million, and in 2007, about USD 50 million (Alijonova, 2009). Furthermore, in the fall of 2007, an agreement was reached on the free transfer to Tajikistan of a significant part of the military equipment and ammunition belonging to the 201st Russian military base. It should be emphasized that the total value of the weapons that Russia began to transfer to the Tajik side in 2008 amounted to about USD 1 billion (Alijonova, 2009).

Russia's cooperation with Turkmenistan was somewhat different. Relations between the two states were negatively affected by the problem of dual citizenship. In 2003, President Saparmurat Niyazov unilaterally withdrew from the agreement on dual citizenship, which had been concluded in 1994. Ashgabat's unfriendly policy toward the Russian and Russian-speaking population led to some cooling of bilateral relations. The situation began to change

at the end of the first decade of the XXI century, in part due to the readiness of Turkmenistan's new President, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, to elevate relations with Russia to a new level. As a result, Moscow began supplying the republic with large quantities of its weapons, including Smerch multiple rocket launchers, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, and T-90S tanks (Table 2).

The above data show that at the beginning of the XXI century, the Russian Federation began to strive for closer cooperation with Central Asian countries in the field of defense. One of the most important factors contributing to the significant increase in Russian arms exports was Moscow's decision to sell its military equipment at preferential prices. This decision aimed, among other things, to ensure that the countries of the region would continue to purchase primarily products of the Russian defense industry, rather than Chinese or American ones.

Along with developing military infrastructure and increasing arms exports, Russia made efforts to resume extensive military-industrial cooperation with the Central Asian republics. In the first decade of the XXI century, Moscow re-established cooperation with a number of Kazakhstan's arms enterprises, including: (1) the S.M. Kirov Machine-Building Plant, specializing in the production of torpedoes; (2) the Special Designing and Technological Bureau "Granit" (overhaul, technical support, and modernization of anti-aircraft systems); (3) the ZIKSTO Joint Stock Company (production of anti-ship and anti-submarine mines); (4) the Plant Named after S.M. Kirov, producing special communication devices; and (5) the Uralsk Plant "Zenit" Joint Stock Company, specializing in the production of military vessels and spare parts for torpedoes (Peyrouse, 2011). In addition, an agreement was reached in 2013 between the Russian company UralVagonZavod and Kazakhstan's Semey Engineering to establish a joint enterprise

Table 2. Large Russian arms transfers to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in 2000–2013

Recipient	Year of delivery	Number of delivered equipment	Equipment
Kyrgyzstan	2003, 2005	3	Mi-8 MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters
Tajikistan	2006	2	Mi-24P/Mi-35P attack helicopters
	2006	2	Mi-8 MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters
	2009	1	S-125 Pechora-2M surface-to-air missile system
	2009	50	Surface-to-air missiles for the S-125 system
Uzbekistan	2002	50	BTR-80 armored personal carriers
	2010	1	S-125 Pechora-2M surface-to-air missile system
Turkmenistan	2009	8	BTR-80A armored personal carriers
	2009–2010	6	BM-9A52 Smerch multiple rocket launchers
	2010	2	Mi-8 MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters
	2010	6	BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles
	2011	60	Bastion anti-tank missiles
	2011–2012	40	Kh-35 anti-ship missiles
	2009–2012	10	T-90S main battle tanks
	2013	60	Igla-S man-portable air defense systems

Source: authors' own compilation based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

in Kazakhstan for the maintenance, repair, and modernization of Russian armored personnel carriers and tanks.

In Kyrgyzstan, the following arms companies worked closely with Russia: (1) the Russian-Kyrgyz joint enterprise Ozero, which develops and tests new types of torpedoes; (2) the Ainur company and the Bishkek Stamping Works, which produce cartridge cases for infantry weapons; (3) the Dastan plant, which produces naval weapons, including Shkval rocket-propelled torpedoes; and (4) the Zhanar company, specializing in the production of radar and magnetometric sensors for alarm systems used in border protection (Gorenburg, 2014).

During the period under consideration, the Russian Federation also cooperated with Uzbekistan's arms industry. Moscow was particularly interested in cooperation with Uzbekistan's aviation industry. The Chkalov Tashkent Aviation Production Association, in collaboration with Russian enterprises, was engaged in the assembly of Il-76 transport planes, Il-78 aerial refueling planes, and Il-114 passenger aircraft. In 2007, a joint venture, UzRosAvia, was established to repair and maintain Mi-8, Mi-17, and Mi-24 helicopters. Also worth mentioning is the joint venture Uzmashprom, which produces small arms under Russian license—AK-74m assault rifles and SVD-7 sniper rifles (Gorenburg, 2014).

One of the key components of Russia's strategic approach in Central Asia involves training military personnel from regional states and conducting joint military exercises. Russia offers training programs to both soldiers and senior military officials, including retraining courses and specialized training. Institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation are highly sought after in Central Asian countries. Between 1993 and 2006, approximately 2,500 Kazakhstani soldiers graduated from military institutes in Russia, while an additional 15,000 servicemen underwent specific courses or training programs (Peyrouse, 2011). Moreover, not only representatives from the Ministry of Defense but also personnel from the Ministry of Emergency Situations and intelligence officers from Kazakhstan participated in these training programs. Similarly, around 800 military officers from Kyrgyzstan and approximately 500 officers from Tajikistan have received training in Russia. Furthermore, Russian military bases in Central Asia, such as the Kant Air Base and the 201st base, offer specialized on-site training opportunities for Central Asian officers.

Based on the data in Table 3, it can be concluded that Russia conducted numerous military exercises with Central Asian states (except neutral Turkmenistan) during the period under review. Notably, the frequency of these exercises increased significantly in the second half of the first decade of the XXI century. This increase applies to both bilateral and multilateral military maneuvers.

It is also important to note the differing approaches to military cooperation with Moscow between Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan on the one hand, and Uzbekistan on the other. The first group of countries regularly participated actively in various exercises with Russia. Tashkent, on the other hand, even while being part of the CSTO, was much less active. Often, Uzbekistan was represented at exercises only by a group of observers and sometimes ignored joint maneuvers entirely. This exemplifies the multi-vector policy of Karimov, who was not interested in excessive rapprochement with Moscow. However, regardless of Uzbekistan's position, it can be said that Russia has succeeded in intensifying military cooperation with at least three countries in the region—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

Roger McDermott, a senior fellow at the U.S. think tank The Jamestown Foundation, states that Moscow provides training for Kazakhstan's armed forces in key areas such as artillery, aviation, and naval doctrine, significantly impacting the combat capability of Kazakhstan's military. According to McDermott, without Russian assistance, Kazakhstan's military would "undoubtedly degrade" (McDermott, 2012, p. 60). This statement also applies to Bishkek and Dushanbe, as Russia helped create the armies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and offers soldiers from these countries training not only in Russia but also at two of its military bases.

Geopolitical Position of Russia after 2013

By 2014, Russia had significantly strengthened compared to the beginning of the XXI century.

According to the World Bank (2023), the country's GDP had surged to USD 2.06 trillion, an eightfold increase from USD 259.7 billion in 2000. The defense budget also saw a substantial rise, reaching USD 84.7 billion, up from USD 9.2 billion in 2000. Since 2008, Moscow had been actively reforming its armed forces (Oxenstierna, 2016). A crucial factor in Russia's enhanced power was the conclusion of the Second Chechen War, which resulted in Moscow regaining control over Chechnya. Furthermore, in 2014, Moscow took Crimea from Ukraine and incorporated it into Russia. The following year, Russia launched a military operation in Syria, marking its first intervention outside the post-Soviet space since the Afghan War (1979–1989). Over the course of several years, Russian-backed President Bashar al-Assad expanded his control over Syrian territory from one-fifth to two-thirds. Additionally, Moscow re-established its military presence in the eastern Mediterranean, with Russian troops stationed at the Khmeimim Air Base and the naval base in Tartus.

Scott Feinstein and Ellen Pirro argue that Russia, as a rising power, seeks to alter the post-1991 balance of power in which the United States has been the sole superpower. By increasing its military activity abroad, Moscow is "testing" the global order—both to achieve power gains and interpret new information about the world (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021).

Table 3. Russia's military exercises with Central Asian states in 2000–2013

State	Bilateral exercises	CSTO drills	CIS military exercises	SCO drills
Kazakhstan	Center-2008; Air Forces-2009, Shygyys-2011; Aldaspan 2008 and 2012	Rubezh 2004–2008 and 2010; Interaction 2009–2013; Cobalt 2010, 2013	Southern Shield-2001; Combat Commonwealth 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013	Coalition-2003; Peace Mission 2007, 2010, and 2012
Kyrgyzstan	South-2006, Dostuk-2013, and anti-aircraft exercises at Russia's Ashuluk training ground	Rubezh 2004–2008 and 2010; Interaction 2009–2013; Cobalt 2010 and 2013	Southern Shield-2001; Combat Commonwealth 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013	Coalition-2003; Peace Mission 2007, 2010, and 2012
Tajikistan	Regular exercises involving Tajik units and soldiers from the 201st base	Rubezh 2004–2008 and 2010, Interaction 2009–2013, and Cobalt 2010 and 2013	Southern Shield-2001; Combat Commonwealth 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013	Coalition-2003; Peace Mission 2007, 2010, and 2012
Uzbekistan	Exercises at the Forish training ground in 2005 and Combat Fraternity-2006 exercises	Tashkent did not participate in CSTO military drills	Combat Commonwealth 2000 and 2007	Peace Mission-2007
Turkmenistan	Ashgabat did not participate in military exercises with other countries			

Source: authors' own compilation based on Russian Defense Ministry data.

Since 2014, Russia has intensified large-scale military exercises near the Baltic states and Poland, as well as joint maneuvers with China in the Pacific. These actions are intended to showcase Russia's military capabilities. According to G. Davis and M. Slobodchikoff, the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West primarily benefits China. Moscow is forced to station substantial forces in areas bordering NATO member states, enabling Beijing to maintain a smaller military presence along its border with Russia and to focus more on increasing its economic and political influence in other regions of the world (Davis & Slobodchikoff, 2018).

Based on the above, it can be concluded that since 2014, the Russian Federation has increasingly focused on bolstering its position in the international arena. In contrast to the 1990s and early 2000s, when Moscow dismantled its overseas military facilities and withdrew military contingents, the country's current foreign policy trajectory has shifted significantly. These changes are primarily driven by the growing material power of the Russian Federation, which has enabled Moscow to compete more effectively with Washington for influence in various regions of the world.

Russia's Military Policy in Central Asia in 2014–2022

Unlike the previous period, no new Russian military facilities were established in the region between 2014 and 2022. However, in view of the potential withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Moscow began modernizing its bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Reports of the

reinforcement of Russian military bases emerged as early as 2014. During that time, four upgraded Su-25 attack aircraft and five upgraded Su-25SM were relocated to the Kant base. Between 2020 and 2021, two Mi-8MTV5-1 transport helicopters and two Su-25 attack aircraft were deployed to the base, replacing older aircraft models. Additionally, an upgraded RL131 radar station and a VIP177M3 indicator system were delivered to Kant (KG, 2021b). The new radar systems enable the Russian military to constantly monitor the airspace over Kyrgyzstan. Similar efforts have been undertaken at the 201st military base in Tajikistan. In 2016, the base received approximately 100 BTR-82A armored personnel carriers. Between 2019 and 2021, the Russian contingent also received 30 upgraded T-72BZM tanks, a squadron of S-300PS anti-aircraft systems, Kornet anti-tank systems, Verba anti-aircraft missile systems, Kord sniper rifles, and AK-12 automatic rifles (Interfax, 2022).

In recent years, the media have periodically reported on the potential establishment of a second Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan. President Almazbek Atambayev, for example, has suggested that Moscow should establish a new base in southern Kyrgyzstan (Kucera, 2017). It can be assumed that with the help of additional Russian troops, Bishkek aims to strengthen its position in relations with Tajikistan. The presence of Russian troops near the border with Tajikistan could help reduce the frequency and severity of clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, regardless of Kyrgyzstan's motives, it can be argued that in recent years, Russia has focused on strengthening its existing base in the north of the republic and has not taken any practical steps to establish a second base.

Let us turn to an analysis of Russian arms exports to Central Asian countries. As in the previous section, we will

first consider Russian arms sales to Kazakhstan (Table 4), which has traditionally been the largest customer of the Russian arms industry. Next, we will analyze arms deliveries to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Table 5). Finally, we will focus on Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Table 6)—countries that are not part of the CSTO.

As shown in Table 4, Astana imported a wide spectrum of armaments from Russia between 2014 and 2021, ranging from armored personnel carriers to multirole fighters. According to analysts at the Kennan Institute, Russia accounted for about 85% of Kazakhstan's arms imports between 2014 and 2018 (Jardine & Lemon, 2020). It should be noted that Kazakhstan has begun to pay much more attention to strengthening its air force: since 2014, Astana has imported 24 Su-30 MK fighters and 12 Mi-35 attack helicopters. Additionally, Kazakhstan has acquired five S-300 systems, a substantial increase compared to the single system ordered by Astana between 2000 and 2013.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as before, received arms for free from the Russian side. Between 2014 and 2018, Russia accounted for about 90% of Tajikistan's arms imports and over 95% of Kyrgyzstan's (Jardine & Lemon, 2020). Both countries primarily receive armored vehicles, while aircraft and helicopters constitute a smaller share of their imports. Worth noting is that Moscow provides Bishkek and Dushanbe with BTR-70M armored personnel carriers, whereas Kazakhstan imports the more modern BTR-82A. Nevertheless, Russian military aid has undoubtedly enhanced the combat capabilities of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, especially considering their limited financial possibilities following the collapse of the USSR.

Uzbekistan left the CSTO in 2012, and as a result, one would assume that military cooperation between Tashkent and Moscow would weaken. In reality, however, the situation is the opposite. According to Margarete Klein, between 2000 and 2016, Russia's share of arms imports to Uzbekistan was only 10% (Klein, 2019). This indicates that, despite being a member of the CSTO, Tashkent preferred armaments from China, the U.S., and France. In 2016, Moscow forgave Uzbekistan USD 865 million in debt, expecting this concession to enhance military cooperation with the republic. It was unclear how Russian-Uzbek

relations would continue, but following the death of Islam Karimov in September 2016 and the subsequent rise to power of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan increased its arms imports from the Russian Federation. The best illustration of the intensification of Russian-Uzbek military cooperation is Uzbekistan's purchase of 12 Mi-35M attack helicopters and the modernization of 100 tanks with Russian components. Uzbek media regularly report that Tashkent intends to buy a batch of Russian Su-30SM fighter jets and BTR-82 armored personnel carriers. Nevertheless, even if Mirziyoyev is indeed interested in these armaments, Uzbekistan has not yet taken any practical steps in this direction.

In the case of Turkmenistan, there is a noticeable weakening of the position of the Russian military-industrial complex. According to SIPRI's analysts (Fleurant et al., 2017), Russia (20% of Turkmen imports) has dropped to third place on the list of the largest arms exporters to Turkmenistan, as Ashgabat has begun to import arms mainly from Turkey (36%), and China (27%). This state of affairs is likely related to the overall decline of Russia's share in Ashgabat's foreign trade and the multi-vector policy of Berdimuhamedov.

During the period from 2014 to 2022, the Russian Federation expanded its cooperation with the military-industrial complexes of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, achieving the most significant successes in Kazakhstan. Here are some notable examples of military-technical cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan. In 2015, the Russian concern Almaz-Antey and Kazakhstan Engineering signed a contract to overhaul Kazakhstan's S-300PS systems. Russia provided the technical documentation and five S-300PS systems free of charge to Astana, enabling joint repair and modernization efforts. The joint stock company Russian Helicopters signed a contract with Kazakhstan Engineering for the assembly of Mi-8AMT/Mi-171E helicopters. Between 2020 and 2021, the first six helicopters, assembled by Aircraft Repair Plant No. 405 in Almaty, were delivered to Kazakhstan's Ministry of Emergency Situations. An additional 11 helicopters of the same model were planned for assembly by the end of 2023. Additionally, the Russian company UralVagonZavod, in collaboration with Kazakhstan's Semey Engineering, is

Table 4. The largest arms transfers from the Russian Federation to Kazakhstan in 2014–2021

Year of delivery	Number of delivered equipment	Equipment
2013–2015	10	Mi-8 MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters
2015	200	Surface-to-air missiles for the S-300 system
2015	5	S-300PS surface-to-air missile systems
2015–2017	90	BTR-82A armored personal carriers
2015–2020	24	Su-30 MK multirole fighters
2016, 2018, and 2020	12	Mi-35M attack helicopters
2021	100	Surface-to-air missiles for the Buk-M2 system

Source: authors' own compilation based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

Table 5. The largest arms transfers from the Russian Federation to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2014–2021

Recipient	Year of delivery	Number of delivered equipment	Equipment
Kyrgyzstan	2015–2017	60	BTR-70M armored personnel carriers
	2017	2	An-26 transport aircraft
	2018	9	BRDM-2MS armored reconnaissance vehicles
	2019	4	Mi-8 MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters
	2019	2	P-18 radars
Tajikistan	2016	26	BTR-70M armored personnel carriers
	2017	4	BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles
	2017	2	Mi-24 V/Mi-35 attack helicopters
	2017	2	Mi-8T transport helicopters
	2017	3	T-72B1 tanks
	2019	9	BRDM-2MS armored reconnaissance vehicles

Source: authors' own compilation based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

involved in modernizing T-72B tanks to the T-72B3 standard (Osipanova, 2020). These examples highlight the broad scope of Russian-Kazakh cooperation, including the production of helicopters and the overhaul and modernization of air defense systems and tanks.

In the case of Uzbekistan, it is noteworthy to mention an agreement between the Chirchik Aviation Repair Plant and the Russian enterprise UEC-Klimov to establish a joint engine repair center for both combat and civilian helicopters (Romakayeva, 2021). This initiative likely became more significant for Uzbekistan following Tashkent's procurement of Russian attack helicopters. Additionally, the Almaz-Antey concern is involved in modernizing Uzbekistan's P-37 radar systems. Furthermore, President Putin has repeatedly expressed Moscow's readiness to collaborate in the joint production of military equipment within Uzbekistan's territory. Regarding Kyrgyzstan, it is notable that a contract was signed with the Bishkek corporation Dastan for the production of equipment for the Russian Navy, amounting to USD 5.4 million (KG, 2021a).

Based on the data in Table 7, the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, there has been a significant decrease in bilateral military exercises with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan compared to the previous period, while the number of exercises within the CIS and SCO frameworks has remained unchanged. Additionally, there has been an increase in

CSTO maneuvers. However, this does not mean that Moscow, Astana, and Bishkek have limited themselves only to multilateral interactions. CSTO exercises include various stages, some of which involve coordinating combat operations in a bilateral format. For example, during the Rubezh-2016 exercise, Russian and Kyrgyz servicemen defended two villages from a simulated terrorist attack. Similarly, in the Search-2018 exercise, Russian and Kazakh special forces jointly took control of a simulated enemy camp. Not all CSTO exercises focused on counter-terrorism. For instance, during one stage of the Cooperation-2016 maneuvers, participants simulated a response to NATO units which invaded a CSTO member state.

The second notable fact evident from the data in Table 7 is the continuation of numerous bilateral exercises with Tajikistan. These exercises consistently involve soldiers from the 201st military base, focusing on various scenarios simulating counter-terrorism operations. The intensive co-operation between Russia and Tajikistan is closely linked to Tajikistan's extensive border with Afghanistan, which is the longest among all Central Asian countries. Additionally, it is worth noting that during the second decade of the XXI century, the United States withdrew the majority of its troops from Afghanistan. This circumstance created favorable conditions for the Taliban and its allies to intensify their activities. Consequently, in 2021, Russia initiated the

Table 6. The largest arms transfers from the Russian Federation to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in 2014–2021

Recipient	Year of delivery	Number of delivered equipment	Equipment
Uzbekistan	2017–2018	100	R-73 air-to-air missiles for MIG-29 fighters
	2019	10	Typhoon-K armored vehicles
	2019–2021	12	Mi-35M attack helicopters
	2021	100	V-84 engines for T-64 tanks
Turkmenistan	2015	2	Mi-8 MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters
	2015–2016	2	S-125 Pechora-2M surface-to-air missile systems
	2015–2016	100	Missiles for S-125 Pechora-2M and Pechora-2BM systems

Source: authors' own compilation based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

Table 7. Russia's military drills with Central Asian countries in 2014–2021

State	Bilateral exercises	CSTO drills	CIS military exercises	SCO drills
Kazakhstan	Center-2015, and exercise in Tuva in 2021 r	Collective forces (CRRF) exercise in 2015, annual drills search: 2016–2019 and in 2021, Rubezh 2016 and 2021, Combat Fraternity: 2017–2019 and in 2021, Interaction: 2014–2019 and in 2021, and Echelon-2020	Anti-Terror-2014; Combat Commonwealth 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021	Peace Mission 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2021
Kyrgyzstan	Special forces and airborne units exercise in the Tien-Shan mountains in 2015	Collective forces (CRRF) exercise in 2015, annual drills search: 2016–2019 and in 2021, Rubezh 2016 and 2021, Combat Fraternity: 2017–2019 and in 2021, Interaction: 2014–2019 and in 2021, and Echelon-2020	Combat Commonwealth 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021	Peace Mission 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2021
Tajikistan	Regular exercises involving Tajik units and soldiers from the 201st base	Collective forces (CRRF) exercise in 2015, annual drills search: 2016–2019 and in 2021, Rubezh 2016 and 2021, Combat Fraternity: 2017–2019 and in 2021, Interaction: 2014–2019 and in 2021, and Echelon-2020	Combat Commonwealth 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021	Peace Mission 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2021
Uzbekistan	Exercises at the Forish training ground in 2017, Samara Region in 2019, Krasnoyarsk region in 2021, Termez training ground in 2020 and 2021, and drill South-2021	Tashkent did not participate in CSTO military drills	Combat Commonwealth 2019 and 2021	Peace Mission-2021
Turkmenistan	Ashgabat did not participate in military exercises with other countries			

Source: authors' own compilation based on Russian Defense Ministry data.

creation of a joint Air Defense System with Tajikistan, demonstrating its commitment to assisting the republic in strengthening its security.

The third fact evident from the table is the intensification of Russian-Uzbek cooperation after 2016. In 2017, the two sides held their first joint military exercises in 11 years at the Forish training ground. In the following years, the two countries' military units participated in several maneuvers both in Uzbekistan and Russia. Notably, since Mirziyoyev became the leader of Uzbekistan, the country has interacted with Russia much more actively than during the rule of Karimov. Bilateral exercises are held almost annually, which was not the case even when Uzbekistan was part of the CSTO. Additionally, Tashkent has resumed participation in CIS and SCO exercises. All this suggests that Uzbekistan's new leadership no longer sees Russia as a threat to its independence.

As in the previous period, a key element of Russia's strategy in the post-Soviet space was the development of the CSTO. According to Margarete Klein, in the second decade of the XXI century, the CSTO began to focus not only on military threats from other states but also on combating terrorism, illegal migration, extremism, arms and drug smuggling, and cooperation in emergency situations (Klein,

2019). These threats are listed in the new CSTO Collective Security Strategy, adopted in 2016. The strategy calls for the implementation of a wide range of political and military measures. In the military and security sphere, the following tasks were planned: (1) enhancing the defense capabilities of CSTO member states; (2) ensuring the readiness of the CSTO's collective forces; (3) developing military-technical and military-economic cooperation among the member states; (4) equipping the CSTO's collective forces with modern arms and equipment; and (5) ensuring a high level of interoperability of the military-industrial complexes of CSTO member states (Collective Security Treaty Organization, 2016).

Despite its active development, the CSTO has often faced harsh criticism for its lack of decisive action in cases of destabilization in member countries. For instance, the alliance did not deploy collective forces to Kyrgyzstan during anti-government protests in 2005, 2010, and 2020. To assess the effectiveness of "Russia's NATO," we will conduct a detailed analysis of the alliance's response during the crisis in Kazakhstan in early 2022.

On January 2, 2022, protests erupted in Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan, triggered by a doubling of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) prices. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev

declared a state of emergency in multiple regions and implemented a nationwide internet shutdown, but these measures failed to stabilize the situation. Clashes between police and protesters ensued, and several key facilities were occupied in Almaty, including the presidential palace, city hall, international airport, and several TV channel buildings. Additionally, supermarkets, shopping centers, and weapons depots were looted. Protesters also occupied the National Security Committee building and attempted to storm the police department in Almaty. Furthermore, some police officers defected to the protesters' side.

In light of this situation, it became evident that the security forces of Kazakhstan were unable to manage the unrest without outside support. Consequently, on the evening of January 5, President Tokayev appealed to the CSTO for assistance, claiming that the state was attacked by "foreign-trained terrorist gangs" (Reuters, 2022). Following a favorable decision by the Collective Security Council, the CSTO launched a peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan. Russian soldiers were the first to arrive in Kazakhstan on January 6, with military units from other member countries of the alliance deployed in the republic on January 7.

The total number of CSTO collective forces deployed to Kazakhstan amounted to 2,030 troops: 1,480 soldiers from Russia, 200 from Tajikistan, 150 from Kyrgyzstan, and 100 each from Belarus and Armenia (Levystone, 2022). These forces were under the command of Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov, the Commander of the Russian Airborne Forces. Noteworthy is that units from Armenia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan were transported to Kazakhstan using Russian transport planes. This underscores the decisive role played by the Russian Federation in the CSTO operation.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the main task of the peacekeeping mission was to protect important state and military facilities and to provide assistance to the law enforcement agencies of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Given that the Russian contingent was almost three times larger than the contingents of the other CSTO countries combined, its area of responsibility included the largest number of facilities. Russian troops were deployed at the Ak Orda Presidential Palace, the Central Bank, the headquarters of the National Security Committee, the headquarters of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Kazakhstan (in Astana), the headquarters of the joint air defense system of Kazakhstan and Russia (in Almaty), Kazatomprom's facilities in Ust-Kamenogorsk, the 602nd air base in Shymkent, and two international airports (in Astana and Almaty) (Levystone, 2022).

The presence of military units from CSTO countries allowed the Kazakhstani authorities to deploy more members of their security forces to combat street riots. On January 11, Tokayev stated that the major mission of the CSTO was successfully completed and the withdrawal of the peacekeeping contingent would begin in 2 days. During

the extraordinary meeting, the President of Kazakhstan expressed special gratitude to Vladimir Putin for his "understanding and the prompt resolution of the issue of sending the CSTO peacekeeping contingent to Kazakhstan" (Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). The statements made by the Kazakh president indicate that Tokayev saw Moscow as a guarantor of Kazakhstan's security and, under the conditions of the crisis, hoped for Russia's support. It is worth noting that Russia's actions in Kazakhstan were fully supported by China, whose authorities linked the radicalization of the protests to the actions of the United States, stating that "Washington seeks to destabilize the situation in the region in order to contain Russia and China" (Petraszczuk & Wierzbicki, 2023).

It can be stated that the CSTO operation was highly significant for Russia. This operation tested the Russian Federation's ability to swiftly deploy a military contingent into the territory of another state and establish control over its key facilities. The deployment of Russian military units can also be interpreted as a signal to the United States and China that Russia bears responsibility for the security of Central Asia and is capable of acting swiftly and decisively in the face of a serious threat to its national interests (Pannier, 2022). Notably, the CSTO did not suffer any casualties. Considering the above, it can be concluded that the peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan was a significant success for Russia.

Conclusions

By the end of the period considered in the first part of the paper (2000–2013), Russia had once again emerged as a key military player in Central Asia. It retained its military facilities within CSTO member states and established two new military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. During the latter half of the first decade of the XXI century, Moscow significantly increased its arms exports to Central Asian countries. CSTO members were granted access to Russian arms at domestic prices, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan benefited from Russian armaments and training for their military personnel, in exchange for rent paid for the use of military facilities on their territories. Moscow aimed to uphold its position as the primary arms supplier in Central Asia, as any shift to United States, European, or Chinese armaments by regional countries could potentially weaken its influence. Additionally, during the latter half of the first decade of the XXI century, there was a notable increase in the number of military exercises between Russia and the Central Asian republics, conducted both bilaterally and multilaterally. Russia also successfully revived cooperation with numerous military enterprises in the region, specializing in the production of naval weapons, aircraft, armored personnel carriers, tanks, small arms, and

electronic tools used in border protection. This information suggests that the Russian Federation has made significant efforts to comprehensively strengthen military-technical cooperation with all countries in the region.

The intensification of rivalry between Russia and Western states since 2014 has heightened the strategic significance of the East, including the Central Asian states, in Moscow's foreign policy. Simultaneously, China's activity in the region has increased. With the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, one might assume that a fierce Sino-Russian rivalry could emerge in Central Asia. For Russia, the situation is further complicated by the fact that China, unlike the United States, shares borders with Central Asia. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Beijing does not seek to undermine Russia's position in the region and behaves very cautiously on issues sensitive to Russia. The reason for this is that both Moscow and Beijing are in a state of confrontation with the United States.

Between 2014 and 2022, military-technical cooperation between Russia and Central Asian countries further strengthened, as evidenced by the increase in Russian arms exports to these nations, the reinforcement of Russian military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, regular bilateral and multilateral military exercises, and enhanced cooperation between the Russian military-industrial complex and arms enterprises in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Noteworthy is that Turkmenistan stands out as an exception due to its neutral status, which precludes close military cooperation with other states.

Russia's military activity in the region during crises is particularly noteworthy. Moscow traditionally does not intervene in political crises in Kyrgyzstan, but it quickly responded to the January crisis in Kazakhstan. Russian assistance helped President Tokayev stay in power and stabilize the situation in the country within a short period. This situation clearly demonstrated that Russia is a leading security player in Central Asia. Additionally, Russia is creating joint air defense systems with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (similar to the system already in place with Kazakhstan) and is attempting to persuade Uzbekistan to join the CSTO. Russia's main argument for strengthening its military cooperation with Central Asian states is the looming threat posed by Afghan militants. The issue of possible military expansion by the Taliban or other radical Muslim groups became especially relevant in 2021, following the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

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