

Russia's role in Central Asia

Some 25 years after the breakup of the USSR, Russia is still the dominant player in Central Asia. China and the EU have more trade and investment in the region, but Russia is in the lead on security and defence. Moscow consolidates its influence through a series of Russia-led regional organisations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

What Russia is trying to achieve in Central Asia

In recent years, Russia has increased its presence in Central Asia as part of its drive to consolidate control over its former Soviet republics, which it sees as its sphere of ['privileged interest'](#), at the same time as excluding competitors such as China, the USA and the EU. Apart from this geopolitical objective, Russian influence in Central Asia also serves pragmatic goals, such as promoting trade, protecting ethnic Russian minorities, and tackling security threats.

Some Central Asian countries are closer to Russia than others

The five ex-Soviet Central Asian countries have much in common: all are predominantly Muslim and members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (although the CIS [lacks real influence](#)); except for [Kyrgyzstan](#), they have authoritarian regimes (and even Kyrgyzstan is showing signs of [backsliding](#) on democracy), a factor which complicates relations with Western countries (but not Russia or China).

However, the five countries differ in their stance towards Russia. Kazakhstan and [Kyrgyzstan](#) are Russia's closest allies in the region. Despite this closeness, Kazakhstan – which like Ukraine has a large ethnic Russian minority and whose statehood was the subject in 2014 of [dismissive remarks](#) by Vladimir Putin – was critical of Russia's annexation of Crimea and has [not joined](#) its trade war against Ukraine.

Of the other countries, Tajikistan is a military ally, but is [hesitant](#) about economic integration with Russia. For many years, Uzbekistan has kept its distance from Russia; however, its new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev appears to be [more pro-Russian](#) than his predecessor. Of the five countries, Turkmenistan is least interested in cooperation, though [security](#) and [economic](#) problems may eventually [force](#) it to seek Russia's help.

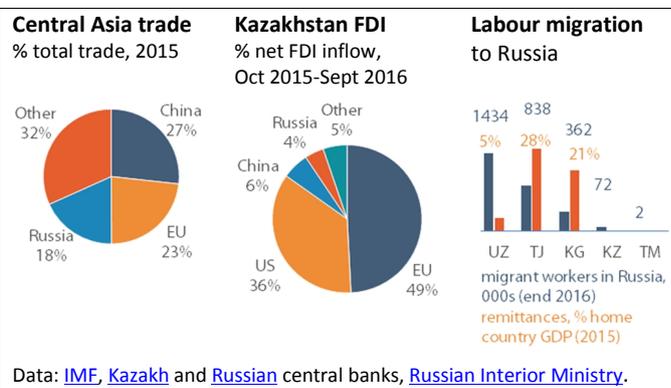
Russia is no longer the main trade and investment partner, but economic ties are still strong

In most Central Asian countries, Russia lags behind China or the EU as a trade and investment partner. For Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, economic ties with Russia are more about labour migration. Despite the economic downturn and [poor working conditions](#), migrant workers still earn much more than at home.

Remittances from Central Asian workers in Russia fell by nearly half between 2013 and 2015, but still make a vital contribution to the economies of their home countries. For its part, despite recession Russia needs labour migration to compensate for its shrinking working-age population.

In January 2015 Russia launched the [Eurasian Economic Union](#) (EEU) with Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia (Kyrgyzstan joined in August 2015), which aims to create an EU-style single market. However, intra-EEU trade is falling; in the first half

Membership of regional organisations



of 2016, Russian trade with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan fell by 28 % year-on-year. Problems include persistent [trade barriers](#), the Russian economic slowdown and a lack of complementarity – for example, Russia and Kazakhstan both mainly export fossil fuels and import manufactured goods, so they are not natural trade partners for one another. Russia's backing for the EEU despite the lack of substantial trade benefits suggests that the bloc is above all a [geopolitical](#) rather than an economic project.

For Kazakhstan and particularly Kyrgyzstan, the main benefit of EEU membership is that their nationals no longer need a permit to work in Russia; in 2015, the number of new migrants from those countries rose by [12.3 %](#) and 6 % respectively. Simultaneously with the EEU's launch, Russia has [tightened conditions](#) for non-EEU nationals, who must now pass a test and pay higher fees for work permits; new migration from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan has fallen by 19 % and 16 %. Despite dependence on continued migration to Russia, Tajikistan is still [hesitating](#) over EEU membership, and [Uzbekistan](#) has yet to show any interest.

Russia also supports Central Asia through aid – [US\\$333 million](#) to Kyrgyzstan in 2015, including from a [US\\$1 billion aid package](#) offered as an incentive for joining the EEU, and a more modest US\$22 million for Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has benefited from a [US\\$865 million](#) debt write-off, 95 % of the money it owes Russia.

Russia takes second place to China in the field of energy

Russia is still a major energy player in Central Asia, as an energy supplier (in Kyrgyzstan, where Gazprom now controls the [gas pipeline network](#)) and transit country ([75 % of Kazakh oil](#) reaches the European Union via Russia). Russia effectively [controls](#) Kazakhstan's uranium-mining sector; however, energy investments in other sectors are [faltering](#) (for example, two hydroelectricity projects in Kyrgyzstan were cancelled in 2016), in sharp contrast to the [billions of dollars](#) invested by China. Russia used to be the main purchaser of Turkmen gas, which it re-exported [at a profit](#), but lower gas prices and sluggish demand have made this practice less profitable; in 2016 Russia [stopped](#) buying Turkmen gas altogether. Since 2009, a new [gas pipeline to China](#) has made Central Asian gas exporters less dependent on Russian pipelines.

Russia is still the dominant defence and security player in the region

Russia is the main defence player in Central Asia: it is Kazakhstan's [largest arms supplier](#), leads the [Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) (CSTO) military alliance and is the only external country (apart from India) to have military bases in the region: [7 000 troops](#) in Tajikistan (the largest Russian military presence in any foreign country), an airbase in Kyrgyzstan, and several facilities in Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan pulled out of the CSTO in 2012; its new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has [ruled out](#) a return to the alliance.

Another security cooperation platform in the region is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), to which Russia and China belong, as well as four Central Asian countries (not Turkmenistan). Russia's interest in the SCO used to be [limited](#) by concerns over potential rivalry with China; however, after Russia's [pivot east](#) in the face of Western sanctions, in 2014 the SCO held its [largest-ever](#) joint anti-terrorism exercise.

Russia and Central Asian countries share several security concerns, such as the spread of Islamic terrorism and drug trafficking, with Afghan heroin transiting the region to reach Russia's [estimated 1.5 million users](#). [Tajikistan](#) and Turkmenistan lack the capacity to effectively guard their borders with Afghanistan against both these threats. In March 2016, Russia and Tajikistan carried out joint military exercises to prepare for a potential incursion of Islamic extremists; however, an October 2015 [suggestion](#) by Vladimir Putin of joint CIS border patrols along the Afghan border has not been followed through.

Russian soft power in Central Asia is still substantial

Russian influence in Central Asia also builds on close cultural ties, the result of over a century of Russian rule. Only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan still have large Russian ethnic minorities, and the number of Russian speakers is in [decline](#); nevertheless, Russian is still widely used as an inter-ethnic lingua franca, and Russian-language media are [popular](#). Such closeness is reflected in support for economic integration with Russia, with one [survey](#) showing 81 %, 74 % and 68 % public support for EEU membership in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan respectively, despite a lack of economic benefits for Kazakhstan.

The EU sees Russia as a potential partner rather than a competitor in the region. For example, the June 2015 Council [conclusions](#) on the EU-Central Asia Strategy, while not naming Russia, call for dialogue with 'other states active in the region, with a view to seeking synergies ... on such issues as security, inter-connectivity, transport, energy and sustainable development'. Similarly, the European Parliament [resolution](#) of April 2016 on implementation and review of the same strategy acknowledges Russia's strong influence, and believes there are many areas of shared interest, including infrastructure development and combating extremism.