

Session 8

The Central Asian Chessboard: Seeking Cooperation Amid Competition



Moderator

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Speakers

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Dr. Aijan Sharshenova, Executive Director at Crossroads Central Asia

Dr. Esmira Jafarova, Board Member of the Center of Analysis of International Relations, AIR Center

Prof. Sean Roberts, Professor of the Practice of International Affairs, George Washington University

Discussants

Dr. Kenan Aslanlı, Expert, IRAM Center

Turan Gafarli, Non-Resident Fellow, Topchubashov Center

Dr. Vügar İmanbeyli, Associate Professor, Marmara University

Prof. Giray Saynur Derman, Professor, Marmara University

Prof. Oktay Tanrısever, Professor of International Relations, Middle East Technical University

Prof. Fahri Türk, Professor, Trakya University

Dr. Altay Atlı, Managing Director, Atlı Global

Key Takeaways

- Since 2022, Central Asian states have gained global recognition as independent actors, with Türkiye establishing early bilateral ties. Türkiye's democratic ideals play a crucial role in the region's paradigm shift towards comprehensive development.
- Post-Ukraine war, Central Asian states exhibit identity assertiveness, marking a significant decolonisation process. This departure from historical passivity reflects a proactive stance since gaining independence from the Soviet Union.
- The East-West Economic Corridor is central to regional collaboration, fostering connectivity and global visibility. The Organisation of Turkic States holds potential for economic and defence collaboration, but challenges like Russian caution and internal capacity building persist.

- Central Asia's relationship with Russia, rooted in cultural ties, contrasts with limited engagement from the US and the EU. Reciprocal partnerships are essential for the region's sustainable development and security.
- Central Asia's strength lies in assimilating diverse influences beyond its Turkic identity. Recognizing affiliations to Russia and Islam is crucial. Strategic collaboration with China demands a nuanced approach to safeguard regional interests.

Summary

It was stated in this expert roundtable titled "The Central Asian Chessboard: Seeking Cooperation Amid Competition" that the geopolitical recalibration since 2022 has thrust Central Asian states into global prominence, with Türkiye serving as a diplomatic trailblazer due to early bilateral engagements. Central Asian countries, exhibiting identity assertiveness following the war in Ukraine, are undergoing a significant decolonisation process, marking a departure from their historic passivity since the Cold War.

It was argued in the roundtable that the East-West Economic Corridor emerges as a transformative force, ensuring regional connectivity and global visibility. The potential of the Organisation of Turkic States as an economic and defence collaboration entity faces challenges, including Russian caution and the need for internal capacity building.

Central Asia's symbiotic relationship with Russia contrasts with limited engagement from the US and the

EU, demanding nuanced recalibration for sustainable development and security. Geopolitical nuances, including China's emphasis on "Turkish-speaking" and internal challenges in the Organisation of Turkic States, underscore the complexity of multilateral partnerships.

The region's historical strength lies in its adaptive capacity to assimilate diverse cultural influences, transcending its Turkic identity. Recognising affiliations to Russia and Islam is crucial for maximising regional benefits. While aware of potential challenges with Chinese business, Central Asian states see opportunities for strategic collaboration, necessitating a careful and nuanced approach to safeguard regional interests.

In navigating these complexities, diplomatic finesse and a sophisticated response are crucial. Experts of this roundtable expressed the view that Central Asian states must leverage historical people-to-people links with Russia to position the region as a pivotal player in global affairs.