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DOMESTIC POLITICAL RISKS IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES AND THEIR CONNECTION WITH EXTERNAL PRESSURES

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ABSTRACT

Domestic political risks in Central Asian countries are growing and interconnected with the external pressures imposed by the big powers and regional actors. Since their independence in the early 1990s, these states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – have maintained the policies of regime concentration, national identity making, and socio-economic transformations. However, their internal political orientations were fragile due to weak institutions, long authoritarian influences, corruption, limited metropolitan room, and repeated socio-economic imbalances. These risks not only create domestic instability but also make Central Asia more exposed to the impact of outside factors. International rivalry, particularly between the United States, Russia, and China, alongside regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, and the European Union, has increased the foreign-dimensional aspects of domestic threats.

The linkage between internal risks and external tension is particularly witnessed in several areas: regime security, where leaders' dependence on foreign actors for authenticity and existence encourages policy compromises; socio-economic threats, where depending on remittances, foreign investment, and export markets generates vulnerabilities; security risks, where regional instability — such as terrorism, extremism, or the spillover from Afghanistan — intersects with the geopolitical order of business of external actors. These overlapping dynamics create a cycle in which external constraints add to internal vulnerability, while internal fragility attracts deeper foreign interventions and probing into the region's political and economic life.

This article argues that understanding Central Asia's domestic political threats cannot be detached from the comprehensive geopolitical environment. The originality of this study lies in exploring how internal fragility and external influence reinforce one another, producing hybrid risks that undermine sovereignty, weaken state institutions, and complicate regional stability. The article showcases how Central Asian states at once resist and accommodate the tensions, disclosing a contradictory impression of both exposure and strength. The findings suggest that unless the internal structures of these countries are not strong, expand their external relations, and improve socio-economic inclusiveness, the circle of need and unreliability will continue.

Key words: *Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, socio-economic, United States, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, European Union, regime security, Afghanistan*

MƏRKƏZİ ASIYA ÖLKƏLƏRİNDƏ DAXİLİ SİYASİ TƏHDİDLƏR VƏ ONLARIN XARİCİ TƏZYİQLƏRLƏ ƏLAQƏSİ

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XÜLASƏ

Mərkəzi Asiya ölkələrində daxili siyasi risklər böyüyür və böyük dövlətlərin və regional aktyorların tətbiq etdiyi xarici təzyiqlərlə bağlıdır. 1990-cı illərin əvvəllərində müstəqillik əldə etdikdən sonra bu dövlətlər - Qazaxıstan, Qırğızıstan, Tacikistan, Türkmənistan və Özbəkistan - rejimin təmərküzləşməsi, milli kimliyin yaradılması və sosial-iqtisadi transformasiya siyasətini davam etdiriblər. Baxmayaraq ki, onların daxili siyasi oriyentasiyası zəif institutlar, uzun avtoritar təsirlər, korrupsiya, məhdud metropoliten imkanları və təkrarlanan sosial-iqtisadi balanssızlıqlar səbəbindən kövrək idi. Bu risklər təkcə daxili qeyri-sabitlik yaratmır, həm də Mərkəzi Asiyanı kənar amillərin təsirinə daha çox məruz qoyur. Türkiyə, İran və Avropa İttifaqı kimi regional aktyorlarla yanaşı, xüsusilə ABŞ, Rusiya və Çin arasındakı beynəlxalq rəqabət daxili təhdidlərin xarici aspektlərini artırır.

Daxili risklər və xarici gərginlik arasında əlaqə xüsusilə bir neçə sahədə özünü göstərir: liderlərin həqiqiliyi və mövcudluğu baxımından xarici aktyordan asılılığının siyasət kompromislərini təşviq etdiyi rejim təhlükəsizliyi; pul köçürmələrindən, xarici investisiyalardan və ixrac bazarlarından asılı olaraq zəifliklər yaradan sosial-iqtisadi təhlükələr; Terrorizm, ekstremizm və ya Əfqanıstandan yayılma kimi regional qeyri-sabitliyin xarici aktyorların işinin geosiyasi nizamı ilə keçdiyi təhlükəsizlik riskləri. Bu dinamiklər xarici məhdudiyətlərin daxili zəifliyi artırdığı bir dövrə hazırlayır, daxili kövrəklik isə daha dərin xarici müdaxilələri və regionun siyasi və iqtisadi həyatına araşdırmaları qiymətləndirir. Bu məqalə iddia edir ki, Mərkəzi Asiyanın daxili siyasi təhdidlərini başa düşmək hərtərəfli geosiyasi mühitdən ayrılı bilməz. Bu tədqiqatın orijinallığı daxili kövrəkliyin və xarici təsirin bir-birini necə gücləndirdiyini, suverenliyi sarsıdan, dövlət institutlarını zəiflədən hibrid riskləri və mürəkkəb regional sabitliyi necə tədqiq etməkdədir.

Məqalədə Mərkəzi Asiya dövlətlərinin həm ifşa, həm də gücə dair ziddiyyətli təəssüratları açıqlayaraq, gərginliklərə dərhal necə müqavimət göstərdiyi və onlara uyğunlaşdığı nümayiş etdirilir. Nəticələr onu deməyə əsas verir ki, bu ölkələrin daxili strukturları güclü olmasa, xarici əlaqələri genişləndirilmədikcə, sosial-iqtisadi inklüzivlik yaxşılaşmasa, ehtiyac və etibarsızlıq dairəsi davam edəcək.

***Açar sözlər** Qazaxıstan, Qırğızıstan, Tacikistan, Türkmənistan, Özbəkistan, sosial-iqtisadi, ABŞ, Rusiya, Çin, Türkiyə, İran, Avropa Birliyi, rejim təhlükəsizliyi, Əfqanıstan.*

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ВНУТРЕННЕЙ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ УГРОЗЫ В СТРАНАХ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ И ИХ СВЯЗЬ С ВНЕШНИМ ДАВЛЕНИЕМ

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АННОТАЦИЯ

В странах Центральной Азии внутренние политические риски растут и связаны с внешним давлением, оказываемым крупными государствами и региональными акторами. После обретения независимости в начале 1990-х годов эти страны — Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан, Туркменистан и Узбекистан — продолжили политику централизации власти, создания национальной идентичности и социально-экономической трансформации. Несмотря на это, их внутренняя политическая ориентация оставалась уязвимой из-за слабых институтов, длительного авторитарного влияния, коррупции, ограниченных возможностей в сфере инфраструктуры и повторяющихся социально-экономических дисбалансов. Эти риски создают не только внутреннюю нестабильность, но и делают Центральную Азию более уязвимой к внешним факторам. Наряду с региональными акторами, такими как Турция, Иран и Европейский Союз, международная конкуренция, особенно между США, Россией и Китаем, усиливает внешние аспекты внутренних угроз.

Связь между внутренними рисками и внешней напряженностью особенно проявляется в нескольких сферах: безопасность режима, стимулируемая политическими компромиссами, обусловленными зависимостью от внешнего актора в плане легитимности и существования лидеров; социально-экономические угрозы, возникающие из-за зависимости от денежных переводов, иностранных инвестиций и экспортных рынков, что создает уязвимости; риски безопасности, связанные с региональной нестабильностью, как, например, терроризм, экстремизм или распространение конфликтов из Афганистана, которые пересекаются с геополитическим порядком действий внешних акторов. Эти динамики готовят почву для периода, когда внешние ограничения усиливают внутренние слабости, а внутренняя уязвимость, в свою очередь, приводит к более глубоким внешним вмешательствам и исследованиям политической и экономической жизни региона. Эта статья утверждает, что для понимания внутренних политических угроз в Центральной Азии невозможно обойтись без учета комплексной геополитической среды. Оригинальность этого исследования заключается в том, как внутренние уязвимости и внешние воздействия взаимно усиливают друг друга, создавая гибридные риски, которые подрывают суверенитет и ослабляют государственные институты, а также в том, как изучаются сложные аспекты региональной стабильности.

В статье показано, как государства Центральной Азии одновременно раскрывают противоречивые впечатления как о раскрытии информации, так и о применении силы, демонстрируя, как они сразу реагируют на напряженность и как адаптируются к ней. Результаты позволяют утверждать, что если внутренние структуры этих стран останутся слабыми, а внешние связи не будут расширены, социально-экономическая инклюзивность не улучшится, то круг нужды и недовольства продолжит существовать.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан, Туркменистан, Узбекистан, социально-экономический, США, Россия, Китай, Турция, Иран, Европейский Союз, безопасность режима, Афганистан

Introduction

Immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – have continued state-building initiatives marked by delicate sovereignty, authoritarian influences, and facing the new politics. Opposite to countries of Eastern Europe that quickly joined into Euro-Atlantic framework, Central Asia's location, history, and internal shortcomings kept these states in a strategically important yet weak, positioning between Russia, China, and the broader Islamic world (Bohr, 2004). Being landlocked and dependent, faced structural threats immediately after independence: relying on outside markets, foreign investment, and transport routes, while their domestic institutions were in the phase of getting mature to do its duties effectively. These challenges of structural reliance on others for survival and internal institutional fragility are the key risky elements pertaining to the political framework in Central Asia even to this date.

The early days of these states were more of relying on the former Soviet elites who were influential in politics and kept that power and suppressed multiculturalism, taking it to very centralized and controlled regimes that struggled with their own legalities. Leaders preferred their own state's character-building and regime consolidation but often failed to improvise political institutions or transparent economic systems (Collins, 2006,). Dishonesty, sponsored politics, and limited urban participation increased communal imbalances, constructing cycles of chaos such as Kyrgyzstan's continuing political crises 2005, 2010 and 2020. These fragilities generated distress that external powers – Russia, China, the United States, Turkey, and Iran – could take an advantage of, nested foreign impact deep-seated into local government (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017).

From a theoretical point of view, Central Asia's dilemma can be analysed from different angles. Realist theory suggests that small and medium-sized states confronting great-power rivalry inevitably rely on outermost guarantor for survival, mostly at the price of autonomy (Waltz, 1979). Liberal view point, somehow, underlines the role of regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which provide a stage or an opportunity for cooperation but at the same time institutionalize dependence on controlling powers (Dadabaev, 2020, p. 1). Constructivism adds separate coating, noting how national identity projects – such as Kazakhstan's "multi-vector" diplomacy or Turkmenistan's "neutrality" – are built findings create to reconcile outer pressures with delicate internal legal acceptance (Anceschi, 2020, p. 181). Together, these theoretical lenses illuminate the opposing realities of Central Asian politics: refusal and accommodation, domination and subservience, frailty and strength.

The idea of *hybrid political risk* is especially functional to examine this change. Hybrid risk indicates the interaction between inner weaknesses and outer interventions, making it a phenomenon that cannot be comprehended in isolation. For example, regimes' reliance on outer actors for economic or military support strengthens leaders' endurance but in the same time underestimates sovereignty and boosts exposure to outer leverage (Mandagaziyev, 2022, p. 220). Just like that, depending on remittances from Russia, which amounts to 30% of GDP in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, maintains household incomes while tying national economies in external labor markets and geopolitical uncertainties (Kiyani, 2023, p. 45). Such hybrid risks underline the interconnection between internal fragility and external impacts, strengthening the cycles of threats.

Geopolitical rivalries boosts these risks. Russia remains a key security player, keeping military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan under the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). China, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has emerged as the principal economic investor, funding infrastructure while avoiding political reform agendas (Laruelle, 2020, p. 1). The United States, although reduced in presence after the Afghanistan withdrawal, continues to frame Central Asia within its strategic competition with China and Russia. Meanwhile, regional actors like Turkey and Iran exert cultural and economic influence, while the European Union promotes governance and rule-of-law initiatives (Starr, 2019). The simultaneous presence of multiple actors generates

both opportunities and constraints, forcing Central Asian states to hedge, balance, and selectively align their foreign policies.

Security threats further complicate the domestic-external nexus. Terrorism, extremism, and instability emanating from Afghanistan directly intersect with Central Asia's fragile domestic structures. The 2021 Taliban takeover intensified concerns about cross-border militancy and refugee flows. Weak border security, porous institutions, and local grievances provide fertile ground for extremist ideologies (Peyrouse, 2016, p. 119). At the same time, great powers instrumentalize these threats to justify deeper involvement – Russia through CSTO operations, China through securitization of Xinjiang and border control, and the United States through counter – terrorism initiatives. Thus, security risks are not purely domestic but trans nationalized, amplifying hybrid vulnerabilities.

Economically, the region faces structural dependence. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan rely heavily on hydrocarbon exports, exposing them to price volatility and external demand fluctuations. China has become the leading consumer of Turkmen gas and Kazakh oil, tying fiscal stability to Beijing's energy needs (Rolland, 2019). At the same time, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain aid- and remittance-dependent, their economies heavily influenced by labor migration to Russia (Kiyani, 2023, p. 45). Liberal theory might view this integration as a pathway to modernization, yet Dependency Theory cautions that asymmetric relations reproduce inequality and structural vulnerability.

Central Asian states have responded with strategies of both *resistance* and *accommodation*. Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy seeks to balance between Russia, China, and the West, projecting sovereignty while pragmatically depending on external actors (Baizakova, 2021, p. 73). Uzbekistan, under President Mirziyoyev, has opened its economy to foreign investors while carefully avoiding over-dependence on any single partner. Turkmenistan's neutrality is rhetorically independent but practically dependent on Chinese gas markets. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan oscillate between Russia's security umbrella and China's economic patronage. These patterns reflect what (Anceschi, 2020, p. 181) terms *hybrid sovereignty* — a political condition in which formal independence coexists with deep external entanglement.

This article contributes to the literature by situating Central Asia's domestic political risks within the broader geopolitical order. Many studies have investigated authoritarian resilience, remittance economies, or great power rivalries separately. However, less attention has been given to the reinforcing interaction between domestic fragility and external influence. This study argues that domestic risks—corruption, weak institutions, authoritarian politics, and socio-economic imbalances—cannot be understood in isolation from external pressures, nor can foreign influences be scrutinized without thinking as the local vulnerabilities they can be exploited. The uniqueness of this perspective lies in handling these phenomena as mutually constitutive rather than separate.

This article consists of these main points to discuss in detail. It studies the connection between the regime's security and external help, showing how the leader's existence is somehow connected to the foreign agenda. It also explores the economic dependencies of these countries and their links to the security and it also investigates the hybrid threats amid the extremism, terrorism and unstable Afghanistan. Finally, it gives policy recommendations, suggesting that without stronger internal institutions and socio-economic policies, the outer pressures will continue to worsen the situation with frailty, consequently, a circle of dependence and insecurity.

Regime Security and External Patronage

Regime security has been the core issue of Central Asian rulers since their independence. Unlike democratic adaptability in Eastern Europe, post-Soviet Central Asia observed the involvement of authoritarian elites who supported political survival over institutional development. These elites, often coming from Soviet-era networks, combined power through backing, clan politics, and subduing of opposition, while at the same time depending on outer players to support their credibility (Collins, 2006). Such dependence makes what is mostly expressed as the “authoritarian bargain,” where

regimes interchange limited sovereignty and policy autonomy for outer support in security, investment, and diplomatic recognition (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017).

Realist theory helps describe this conduct. According to classical and structural realism, fragile states located in strategic regions unavoidably position with strong players for security (Waltz, 1979). For Central Asian leaders, regime security is identical to country's security, as local credibility is weak and mostly contested. Thus, their foreign policy choices are less about advancing national interest in the abstract and more about ensuring regime survival in the concrete (Anceschi, 2020, p. 181). This produces a political economy of dependency where outer players-Russia, China, the United States, and regional players-become advocate of regime progress rather than neutral partners in development.

Kazakhstan: Balancing Through Multi-Vector Diplomacy

Kazakhstan witnesses the ideal case study of a government that has smartly managed external influence to strengthen its own legality and credibility. Former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's "multi-vector diplomacy" sought to balance Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union simultaneously (Baizakova, 2021, p. 73). When Kazakhstan joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), it also invited Western energy companies such as Chevron and Total in its oil sector, and welcomed Chinese infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (Rolland, 2019). The maintenance of this balanced approach allowed the regime to enjoy its autonomy while avoiding dependence on a single outer power. Nevertheless, behind the scenes, the motive of the powers remains the same.

Nazarbayev's resignation in 2019 and the succession of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev underline the frailty of this positioning. When the January 2022 protests over increasing oil prices became a huge political crisis, Tokayev requested CSTO for intervention and requested them to restore order (Laruelle, 2020, p. 1). Russia's military interventions witnessed the rise of Kazakhstan's security dependence and raised questions about the price paid as a result of adopting multi-vector policies in times of chaos. The Kazakh example showed how outer assistance, while maintaining regimes, at the same time has challenges for its sovereignty and is exposed to all kinds of external threats as well.

Kyrgyzstan: Chronic Instability and Security Dependence

Kyrgyzstan exhibits a distinct trajectory, characterized by persistent political uncertainty and a deep-rooted dependence on foreign powers for regime survival. Since independence, Kyrgyzstan has witnessed three regime overthrows (2005, 2010, 2020), each stimulated by corruption, nepotism, and economic injustices (Collins, 2006). The fragile institutions and fractured elite environment made Kyrgyzstan highly exposed to external interference. Russia deploys a military base at Kant, while China has become the biggest creditor for Kyrgyzstan, and is in charge of important portions of its external debt (Cooley, Heathershaw, 2017).

In Kyrgyzstan, the external backing for the governments or the regimes is not an option any more; it has become a necessity. The Russian security framework provided to Kyrgyzstan still holds quite a significant place to keep it away from the external security threats, while Chinese loan funds fund all the major projects and the country's budget. Somehow, this kind of dependence on the major powers from outside has deepened the roots of the authoritarian negotiations where governments bear the interference of external powers in return for their survival, leaving not much of space to any kind of democracy to grow. This reflects what Mandagazyev (2022, p. 220) calls "elite-centred externalism," where foreign support is arbitrated through the elites of the country and ignoring the institutions, ending up in a quite personalized framework of the governments.

Turkmenistan: Neutrality in Rhetoric, Dependency in Practice

Though Turkmenistan officially showcases the image of neutrality, yet in real, the country is highly reliant on the regional powers, specifically on China, which is a buyer of 80% of the gas exported by it (Rolland, 2019). The Turkmenistan government under Saparmurat Niyazov and later Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov consolidated power locally because of personality-driven politics while externally relying on Chinese financial support to keep the country financially stable.

The contradiction of Turkmen neutral behaviour is that it disguises extensive constitutional reliance. By denying to join multilateral security organizations like CSTO or SCO, Turkmenistan keeps away from an overt entanglement, but this still has not lessened its insecurity. In fact, Beijing's role of an important buyer of Turkmen gas successfully binds the regime's financial stability to the Chinese call for eroding economic security (Laruelle, 2020). The belief of being neutral thus becomes a rambling instrument of authenticity while the economic dependence lingers on—a constructivist illustration of how the country's pursuit of identities that conceal structural threats.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan: Selective Patronage

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan speak for intermediate cases. With Islam Karimov in power Uzbekistan maintained its independence, avoiding both Russian and Western impact while continuing authoritarian command. Nevertheless, Karimov's death in 2016 and the coming of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to power witnessed a shift toward a careful tilt toward selective external influence. Uzbekistan has welcomed Chinese investment, maintained stable relations with Russia, and expanded engagement with Western partners, while avoiding commitment to any single power (Dadabaev, 2020, p. 1). The government utilizes this discriminatory backing to improve its legitimacy, presenting reforms as innovative.

Tajikistan, compared to other states, has been more exposed to external actors, particularly Russia. About 30% of its GDP comes from labor migrants working in Russia, and the Tajik economy is deeply connected to Russia (Kiyani, 2023, p. 45). For security purposes, Russia is maintaining a military base in Dushanbe, which acts as both a deterrent against external threats and a guarantor of regime survival. At the same time, China has spread its presence, given loans and constructed infrastructure, hence creating a dual dependency (Laruelle, 2020, p. 1). Tajikistan demonstrates the hybrid risk model: domestic fragility, external presence, while outer backing strengthens regime resilience but deepens structural vulnerabilities.

Theoretical Implications: Regime Security Theory and Hybrid Sovereignty

In all five Central Asian countries, one thing is common: they all need external support to keep their regimes going. This confirms Regime Security Theory, which shows that the elite classes in these governments prioritize their own survival as part of authoritarian rule over public goods or institutional reforms (Brownlee, 2007). External powers guarantee the survival of these regimes not only through formal treaties but also through informal channels that fund and support them, providing financing, various forms of military assistance, and high-level diplomatic backing.

The consequence is what Anceschi (2020, p. 181) terms hybrid sovereignty. Central Asian states are formally sovereign and independent, but in reality their domestic political order is scaffolded by external support. Their sovereignty appears outwardly intact, yet internally it is significantly compromised. These circumstances blur international relations, as these states oscillate between defiance and accommodation, attempting to harmonize symbolic sovereignty with reliance on external powers.

Regime security in Central Asia relies heavily on external assistance. Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy, Kyrgyzstan's instability, Turkmenistan's neutrality, and Tajikistan's dependency all show how internal weakness is intertwined with external influence. While foreign actors help stabilize

these regimes, they also constrain their independence and create new uncertainties. The region illustrates the core contradiction of post-Soviet independence: states are formally sovereign but in practice depend on external support. This hybrid arrangement provides short-term strength but long-term vulnerability, sustaining continuous cycles of dependence and foreign interference.

Economic threats and External Dependencies

Economic threats represent one of the most important aspects of domestic political risk in Central Asia. Despite abundant natural resources and a strategic location, the region has not achieved the desired economic progress. Instead, the economies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan rely heavily on external powers—whether through foreign direct investment (FDI), remittances, or export markets (Pomfret, 2019, p. 1). This reliance generates structural weaknesses that not only expose states to external shocks but also erode political stability, as governments lack the economic independence necessary to shield against social injustices.

Political economy literature emphasizes that resource-rich but institutionally weak states are highly vulnerable to the so-called ‘resource curse’ (Auty, 2001). Rentier dynamics encourage elites to capture resource revenues rather than reinvest them in diversification or social welfare. In Central Asia, this problem is compounded by authoritarian governance, where regimes prioritize regime security over structural reforms. Dependency theory further highlights how integration into global capitalism perpetuates inequalities between core and peripheral states (Frank, 1966, p. 17). In the Central Asian context, dependency is evident not only in North–South relations but also in asymmetric ties with Russia, China, and other regional actors who dominate trade, finance, and labor migration.

Kazakhstan: Energy Wealth and External Exposure

Kazakhstan, the wealthiest Central Asian state, illustrates both the opportunities and risks of resource dependence. Its vast oil and gas reserves, particularly in the Caspian region, attract significant FDI from Western energy companies such as Chevron and ExxonMobil (Maliszewska & Ruta, 2020, p. 525). Oil revenues provide nearly 60% of export earnings and a substantial portion of the state budget. While this wealth has allowed the regime to build infrastructure and maintain social stability, it has also exposed Kazakhstan to external price shocks. The oil price collapse of 2014–2015 led to currency devaluation, inflation, and public discontent, feeding into broader legitimacy crises (Escribano, 2019, p. 68).

China has also emerged as a critical economic partner. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has invested billions in Kazakh infrastructure, including pipelines, railways, and logistics hubs (Rolland, 2019). While these projects enhance connectivity, they deepen Kazakhstan’s reliance on Chinese capital and markets. Dependence on two major external actors—the West for FDI and China for infrastructure—creates vulnerabilities that the regime must carefully navigate. This reliance underscores how Kazakhstan’s multi-vector economic diplomacy is driven less by choice and more by necessity.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Remittance Economies

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are extreme cases of economic vulnerability due to their dependence on remittances. More than 30% of Kyrgyzstan’s GDP and nearly 40% of Tajikistan’s GDP come from remittances sent by migrant workers in Russia (Mogilevskii, 2021, p. 149). This creates a precarious situation, as the livelihoods of millions of households depend on Russian labor markets and migration policies. Any downturn in Russia’s economy, or restrictive migration measures, directly translates into domestic instability in these states.

This dependence on remittances is double-edged. On one hand, remittances reduce poverty and sustain consumption. On the other, they discourage domestic job creation, reduce incentives for economic reform, and increase external leverage over domestic politics. For instance, Russia’s ability to

regulate labor migration has been used as a political tool to pressure Tajikistan into security and foreign policy concessions (Laruelle, 2020, p. 1). From a dependency theory perspective, this dynamic epitomizes the structural asymmetry of the relationship, where peripheral economies remain subordinated to the policies of a core state.

Turkmenistan: The Gas Monopoly and Chinese Leverage

Turkmenistan is often portrayed as economically insulated due to its official neutrality and closed domestic system. However, its economy is perhaps the most externally vulnerable in the region because of extreme export concentration. More than 80% of Turkmenistan's natural gas exports go to China, following the completion of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline (Peyrouse, 2016, p. 119). This creates a single-buyer dependency, giving Beijing extraordinary leverage over Ashgabat.

The Turkmen regime has sought to diversify by promoting projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline, but progress has been slow due to security concerns in Afghanistan. In practice, Turkmenistan's fiscal health depends on Chinese demand and financing. This undermines its proclaimed neutrality, as economic reliance translates into indirect political dependence. Constructivist theory sheds light on this paradox: while the regime discursively promotes neutrality to legitimize itself, material dependencies reveal the limits of this narrative.

Uzbekistan: Selective Opening and Gradual Reforms

Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov was highly protectionist, with limited foreign investment and trade liberalization. Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, Uzbekistan has embarked on gradual reforms, liberalizing currency controls, encouraging FDI, and opening up to regional cooperation (Dadabaev, 2020, p. 1). Chinese, Russian, and Western investors have entered new markets, while remittances continue to provide vital income.

Despite this opening, vulnerabilities remain. The economy is still reliant on commodity exports such as cotton, gold, and natural gas, while unemployment drives large-scale migration. Moreover, Chinese debt financing has increased, raising concerns of debt dependency similar to Kyrgyzstan's experience (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017). The Uzbek case illustrates the difficulty of balancing reform with dependency: opening to external capital may diversify the economy but also create new forms of vulnerability.

Structural Dependence and Hybrid Economies

Across the region, three types of external dependence dominate:

1. *Resource export dependence* (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan),
2. *Remittance dependence* (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), and
3. *Debt-financing dependence* (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan).

Each form of dependence generates vulnerabilities that regimes must manage. Resource dependence ties fiscal stability to global commodity markets; remittance dependence exposes societies to external labor markets; and debt dependence constrains policy autonomy. These vulnerabilities reinforce domestic fragility: when external shocks occur, regimes face heightened social unrest and declining legitimacy.

This pattern confirms the insights of dependency theory (Frank, 1966, p. 17) and world-systems analysis, which argue that peripheral states remain structurally subordinated to external centers of power. In Central Asia, these centers are not only global (United States, EU, China) but also regional (Russia, Turkey, Iran). The hybrid nature of the region's economies—partially resource-based, partially remittance-driven—creates overlapping vulnerabilities that are difficult to disentangle.

Theoretical Implications: Dependency and Authoritarian Resilience

The interplay between economic dependency and authoritarian resilience is particularly important. Scholars argue that external rents—whether from resources, remittances, or loans—provide regimes with the means to sustain patronage networks and suppress dissent (Escribano, 2019, p. 68). This dynamic aligns with rentier state theory, which posits that regimes relying on external rents have weaker incentives to develop inclusive institutions (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987). In Central Asia, economic vulnerabilities do not necessarily weaken regimes; paradoxically, they can reinforce authoritarian rule by providing rents that elites can capture.

However, these same dependencies expose regimes to external shocks that may trigger instability, as seen in Kazakhstan's 2022 protests or Kyrgyzstan's repeated revolutions. Thus, economic dependence produces a dual effect: it reinforces authoritarian resilience in the short term but generates fragility in the long term. The region exemplifies what might be called 'authoritarian dependency,' where regimes remain stable but not sustainable.

Economic vulnerabilities in Central Asia cannot be separated from external dependencies. Kazakhstan's reliance on oil, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's remittance economies, Turkmenistan's dependence on China, and Uzbekistan's cautious reforms all highlight different manifestations of the same structural problem: external dependence undermines domestic resilience. These vulnerabilities feed directly into political risk, as regimes lack the autonomy to shield societies from external shocks. From dependency theory to rentier state dynamics, the evidence suggests that, without structural reforms and diversification, Central Asia will remain locked in cycles of economic fragility and authoritarian resilience.

III. Economic Vulnerabilities and External Dependencies

Economic vulnerability represents one of the most significant dimensions of domestic political risk in Central Asia. Despite abundant natural resources and a strategic location, the region has not achieved sustainable economic diversification. Instead, the economies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan remain heavily dependent on external actors—whether in the form of foreign direct investment (FDI), remittances, or export markets (Pomfret, 2019, p. 1). This dependence creates structural weaknesses that not only expose states to external shocks but also undermine domestic political stability, as regimes lack the economic autonomy necessary to cushion social grievances.

The political economy literature stresses that resource-rich yet institutionally weak states are highly vulnerable to what is termed the 'resource curse' (Auty, 2001).

In Central Asia, this vulnerability has been aggravated by authoritarian governments, where regimes prioritize regime security over structural reforms. Dependency theory further underlines how integration into global capitalism replicates imbalances between core and peripheral states (Frank, 1966, p. 17). Applied to Central Asia, this dependence is evident not only in North–South relations but also in asymmetric ties with Russia, China, and other regional powers that dominate trade, finance, and labor migration.

Kazakhstan: Energy Wealth and External Exposure

Kazakhstan, the wealthiest Central Asian country, exemplifies both the prospects and risks of resource reliance. Its enormous oil and gas reserves, specifically in the Caspian region, attract considerable FDI from Western energy multinationals such as Chevron and ExxonMobil (Maliszewska & Ruta, 2020, p. 525). Oil revenues provide nearly 60% of export earnings and a substantial portion of the state budget. While this wealth has enabled the government to build infrastructure and maintain social cohesion, it has also exposed Kazakhstan to fluctuations in external prices. The oil price crash of 2014–2015 led to currency devaluation, inflation, and public discontent, which contributed to broader legitimacy crises (Escribano, 2019, p. 68).

China has also emerged as an important economic partner. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has invested billions in Kazakh infrastructure projects, including pipelines, railways, and logistics facilities (Escribano, 2019, p. 68).

While these projects foster connectivity, they increase Kazakhstan's dependence on Chinese capital and markets. Reliance on two major external powers—the West for FDI and China for infrastructure—creates vulnerabilities that the government must carefully manage. This dependence underscores how Kazakhstan's multi-vector economic policy is driven less by choice and more by necessity.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Remittance Economies

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are clear examples of economic vulnerability due to their heavy reliance on remittances. More than 30% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and nearly 40% of Tajikistan's GDP come from remittances sent by migrant workers in Russia (Mogilevskii, 2021, p. 149). This creates a precarious situation in which the livelihoods of millions of people depend on Russian labor and migration policies. Any slowdown in Russia's economy or restrictive migration measures directly affects these households.

This total reliance on remittances is double-edged. On the one hand, remittances help reduce poverty and sustain consumption. On the other hand, they reduce local job opportunities, decrease incentives for economic reform, and increase external leverage over domestic politics. For example, Russia's ability to regulate labor migration has been used as a political tool to pressure Tajikistan into security and foreign policy concessions (Laruelle, 2020, p. 1).

Turkmenistan: The Gas Monopoly and Chinese Leverage

Turkmenistan is often portrayed as economically insulated due to its official neutrality and closed domestic system. Nevertheless, its economy may be even more vulnerable because of extreme export concentration. Turkmenistan exports 80% of its natural gas to China, following the completion of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline (Peyrouse, 2016, p. 119). This creates a single-buyer dependency, giving Beijing significant leverage over Ashgabat.

The Turkmen regime has tried to diversify its policy and has taken part in projects like the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline, but development has not shown any progress due to security problems in Afghanistan. In practice, Turkmenistan's fiscal health depends on Chinese demand and financing. This undermines its proclaimed neutrality, as economic reliance translates into indirect political dependence. Constructivist theory explains this contradiction: while the government indirectly promotes neutrality to legalize itself, material reliance uncovers the limitation of this.

Uzbekistan: Selective Opening and Gradual Reforms

Under Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan maintained a protectionist system with restricted trade and external investment. Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise in 2016, gradual reforms have relaxed currency controls, promoted FDI, and encouraged regional cooperation (Dadabaev, 2020, p. 1). New investors from China, Russia, and the West have taken an interest, though remittances remain consistently important. Yet the economy still relies on commodities like cotton, gold, and gas, while unemployment drives migration. Rising Chinese debt further raises concerns of dependency, echoing Kyrgyzstan's experience (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017). Uzbekistan thus highlights the challenges of pursuing reform while mitigating contemporary risks.

Structural Dependence and Hybrid Economies

Across the region, three types of outer reliance dominate:

1. *Resource export dependence* (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan),
2. *Remittance dependence* (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), and
3. *Debt-financing dependence* (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan).

Each form of reliance generates risks that the government must address. Resource dependency links fiscal stability to global commodity markets; remittance reliance exposes societies to external labor markets; and debt dependence constrains policy autonomy. These risks reinforce domestic fragility: when external shocks occur, governments face heightened social unrest and declining legitimacy.

This pattern validates the insights of dependency theory (Frank, 1966, p. 17) and world-systems analysis (Wallerstein, 1974), which argue that peripheral states remain structurally subordinated to external centers of power. In Central Asia, these centers are not only global (United States, EU, China) but also regional (Russia, Turkey, Iran). The hybrid nature of the region's economies—partially resource-based and partially remittance-based—creates overlapping vulnerabilities that are difficult to disentangle.

Theoretical Implications: Dependency and Authoritarian Resilience

The interaction between economic dependency and authoritarian strength is specifically pivotal. Scholars debate that external rents—whether from resources, remittances, or loans—provide governments with the methods to retain backing networks and subdue dissent (Escribano, 2019, p. 68). This dynamic aligns with rentier state theory, which points out that governments dependent on external tariffs have weaker motivation to evolve comprehensive institutions (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987).

In Central Asia, economic threats do not necessarily cripple governments; ironically, they can foster authoritarian rule by furnishing gains that elites can hold on to.

However, this same kind of reliance discloses the governments to outer blows that may ignite destabilization, as witnessed in Kazakhstan's 2022 protests or Kyrgyzstan's frequent revolutions. Thus, economic reliance produces two effects: it strengthens authoritarianism temporarily but generates frailty in the long term. The region exemplifies what might be called 'authoritarian dependency,' where the government remains strong but cannot maintain it.

Economics in Central Asia cannot be split from external reliance. Kazakhstan's dependence on oil, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's remittance, Turkmenistan's dependence on China, and Uzbekistan's careful improvement all underscore different manifestations of the same structural problem: external reliance cripples local strength. These dangers directly nourish political risk, as governments lack autonomy to protect societies from external disturbances. From dependency theory to rentier state dynamics, the evidence suggests that, without structural reforms and diversification, Central Asia will remain locked in cycles of economic fragility and authoritarian resilience.

Conclusion

Central Asia faces continuous local frailty and other constraints, leaving its states cornered between inner fragility and great-power competition. Regime security often depends on external backing, which supports elites in the short term but undermines sovereignty over time. Economies remain linked with oil, gas, remittances, and foreign investment, creating both strengths and weaknesses, as explained by dependency and rentier state theories. Security threats like terrorism and instability from Afghanistan further explain authoritarianism, while at the same time strengthening reliance on Russia, China, and the West.

Recent shifts, including Russia's war in Ukraine, have driven Central Asian states to diversify relations and mindfully explore reforms, but authoritarian elites still oppose deeper change. The region thus endures a contradiction: strengthened through outer help yet feeble due to its reliance on it. In times to come, the longer stable countries and the governments rely on building robust institutions, decreasing economic dependence, and growing regional relations. Without these kinds of structural changes and reforms, Central Asia will stay confined in a round of threats fashioned by both inner fragility and external desires.

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