

## **INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT**



## CENTRAL ASIAN STATES: CATALYSTS FOR THE RUSSIAN-CHINESE NEW GREAT GAME

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### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to articulate the key role that small states play in the contemporary security architecture and how their strategies adapt to the dynamics of the geopolitical landscape. Using this analysis on Central Asia's New Great Game players as a frame of reference, we can further assess how leveraging its position between two spheres of influence can impact the development of a small nation's security.*

*As such, in the elaboration of this paper we studied the defence measures adopted by Central Asian states, with an emphasis on Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with the support of either the Russian Federation or P.R. China and focused on their implications on a regional power game scale.*

**Keywords:** *uncertainty, leverage, hedging, power games, New Great Game*

**Motto:** *"if Lilliputians can tie up Gulliver,  
or make him do their fighting for them,  
they must be studied as carefully as the giant."  
Keohane (1969, p. 310)*

### Introduction

Historical evolutions show us that small states are often limited in their ability to determine their own faith. Moreover, these patterns seem universal across all continents and periods of time. From this standpoint, Central Asian states could be compared to pawns on the grand chessboard of the regional political power players.<sup>1</sup>

After the fall of the USSR, the five newly formed sovereign states in Central Asia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, were engaged in a new silent competition to carve their identity and position in the regional security complex. While this complex is influenced to a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Lena Jonson *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia. Geopolitics, Great Powers, Rivalry and Radical Islam*, (IB Tauris&CO Ltd, UK, 2006), p.3

extent by all the main players of the New Great Game, including states like Turkey, USA, Pakistan or Iran, its dynamics are mainly determined by two great powers which have a direct strategic interest in the region, each for their own reasons – the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.

In the international relations' theoretical models, the actions taken by a state to ensure its own security and protect its interests, often create uncertainty for the security of the surrounding states. As such, from a strategic perspective, any advance (in the defence sector) made by China outside of its pre-existent ties (mainly in the economic sector) to secure its interests in Central Asia could challenge Russia's status quo in the region. Naturally, the Russians respond symmetrically, escalating the issue and thus creating a chain of actions and reactions, which fall under the umbrella of the current security dilemma.

Furthermore, the small countries of Central Asia experienced first-hand the difficulties of building their nations whilst being on the frontline of an undeclared turf war between the Russians and the Chinese. However, as a survival mechanism, they learned to use this apparent vulnerability to advance their own agendas and adopted an active role in the security dilemma. In this paper, we will focus on three of these states: Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and follow how, by choosing to cooperate more heavily with one of the two main players to fulfil separate strategic objectives, they can alter the current power balance.

The purpose of the following study is to show how a small state can leverage its position between the Russian and Chinese spheres of influence by using a mixed strategy known as hedging and therefore ensures the external support needed from both players simultaneously. Moreover, while most scholars focus on the interests and strategies of the great players in the region, we will focus on the options of the smaller states and on their most advantageous strategies.

The paper starts by providing context on the latest evolutions in the geopolitical alliances formed in Central Asia and carries on to provide insight into the current strategies adopted by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as the region slowly morphs into a complex multipolar system.

### **A new strategic approach**

#### **Context**

As main actors of the regional security dilemma, the Russian and Chinese interests in the region shape the geopolitical scenery. While Russia continues to dominate the Central Asia defence sector and China the economic sector, the current policies are not linear and the traditional spheres of influence now often overlap, pressuring the smaller states to rethink their

former allegiances. For instance, Russia formed and leads the Collective Security Treaty Organization and takes part, together with China, in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, to protect the security of its investments, China initiated the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism<sup>2</sup>, a security mechanism that does not include Russia. Moreover, Russia also increased its influence in the economic sphere by expanding the cooperation in the CIS space- it created the Eurasian Economic Union, based on the EU model, which is a competitor of the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt. Nevertheless, both countries refrain from directly antagonizing each other and are currently debating a common framework for the two economic initiatives.<sup>3</sup> In addition, we mention that due to its natural configuration, in this region the economic sector (energy, especially) and state security are often linked.

According to a vulnerability report published annually by the US based think tank the Fund for Peace, along with Foreign Policy, the Fragile States Index, all five Central Asian states have registered progress in their development over the past five years<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, statistically, the security apparatus of all five countries followed a continuous upward trend for the last ten years, which shows an increase in overall state stability and security.<sup>5</sup> We will further assess the positioning within the Russian-Chinese security dilemma of three of the five Central Asian states.

The regional security complex formed in Central Asia during the past 25 years implies that each state must mould its defence policies by factoring in the interests and priorities of its neighbours. When discussing security issues in Central Asia, the focus will be on the states that border Afghanistan, the main source of instability for the region. As such, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are linked to each other regardless of their historical and political differences due to several reasons – Firstly, their position as frontline states, with large minority groups living in Afghanistan and the return of the Central Asian fighters from the Islamic State<sup>6</sup> raises the risk of the potential

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<sup>2</sup> *Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan issue joint statement on anti-terrorism*, Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, accessed 10 September 2017 at [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-08/04/content\\_4707451.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-08/04/content_4707451.htm)

<sup>3</sup> "Russia, China agree to integrate Eurasian Union, Silk Road, sign deals", *RT*, accessed 10 September 2017, <https://www.rt.com/business/256877-russia-china-deals-cooperation/>

<sup>4</sup> *Five-year trends*, Fragile States Index, accessed 10 September 2017, <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/decade-trends/five-year-trends/>

<sup>5</sup> *Comparative Analysis*, Fragile States Index, accessed 10 September 2017, <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/comparative-analysis/>

<sup>6</sup> Iris Oppelaar, "Central Asia and Islamic State: The Russian Connection", *The Diplomat*, accessed 6 August 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/central-asia-and-islamic-state-the-russian-connection/>

spread of radical Islamism and internal destabilization. Secondly, from an economic standpoint, water scarcity makes the Amu Darya River<sup>7</sup> critical for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan's agriculture sector and its use essential for ensuring Tajikistan's energy necessities in the upstream, thus making dialogue inevitable on the longer term, to ensure national and regional security and avoid the creation of a potential military conflict for vital resources. Thirdly, both from an economic and a military perspective, all three states form an important section that links the East to the West in the new infrastructure projects promoted by China, and in the initiatives promoted by Russia. As these projects develop, these three states start to cooperate to a certain extent<sup>8</sup> in order to capitalize their potential gains on one hand, while leveraging their potential benefits from both Russia and China, on the other.

Turkmenistan ranked 86<sup>th</sup>/178 countries analysed in the Fragile States Index, and it's not a member of neither the SCO nor the CSTO, and it did not sign the Paris Charter for OSCE, deepening its mandate. Moreover, the country has maintained a firm neutrality status recognized by the United Nations. Despite its positive neutrality doctrine, Ashgabat is now looking to modernize its military capabilities<sup>9</sup> and to diversify its suppliers. According to SIPRI<sup>10</sup>, 36% of its weapons come from Turkey, 27% from China and 20% from Russia.

Authorities have reasons to be wary of a potential attack at their southern border, as there have been reports<sup>11</sup> of militant crossings into Turkmenistan as well as increased Taliban activity into the northern Afghan provinces. After a militant border attack that left several Turkmen soldiers dead, the country actively sought Russian military aid<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, in June

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<sup>7</sup> Ramon E Collado, "Water War in Central Asia: the Water Dilemma of Turkmenistan", *Geopolitical Monitor*, accessed 11 September 2017, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/water-war-in-central-asia-the-water-dilemma-of-turkmenistan/>

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Is This The Start Of Regional Cooperation In Central Asia?", *RFEL*, accessed 11 September 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-uzbekistan-mirziyaev-neighbors-cooperation/28506666.html>

<sup>9</sup> "Isolationist Turkmenistan Is Rearming Too", *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Arms' Race*, accessed 12 September 2017, <https://21stcenturyasianarmsrace.com/2016/03/27/isolationist-turkmenistan-is-rearming-too/>

<sup>10</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Report: Turkmenistan is Turkey's Biggest Weapons Buyer", *Eurasianet*, accessed 12 September 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/82476>

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Is There A Terror Threat In Turkmenistan?", *RFEL*, accessed 12 September 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-turkmenistan-terror-threat-afghanistan-islamic-state/28653368.html>

<sup>12</sup> "Turkmenistan Seeks Military Aid From Russia", *Eurasianet*, accessed 12 September 2017, <http://m.eurasianet.org/node/79151>

2016, the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Ashgabat to discuss<sup>13</sup> further security cooperation, weapons sales and tackling regional instability. In spite of the weakening of Russian-Turkmen relations following a spat with Gazprom on gas prices, Turkmenistan is still dependent on Russian support for its defence. In addition, Turkmenistan took part of NATO training programs to improve border security and was involved in the Northern Distribution Network used by the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

Neighbouring Uzbekistan ranked 63<sup>rd</sup>/178 in the Fragile States Index and 1<sup>st</sup> in terms of military strength among Central Asian States in the Global Fire Power rating for 2017<sup>14</sup>. It forms part of SCO, hosts its permanent counter-terrorism arm, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure, and, also, it expressed interest in strengthening economic ties with China within the BRI, which would bring much-needed large-scale funding for infrastructure development<sup>15</sup>. The country is particularly relevant for China, as it hosts a large Uyghur community, whose ties to the separatist movements in Xinjiang<sup>16</sup> have been a focal point for the Chinese policy in the region. What's more, Uzbekistan is no longer a member of the CSTO and it is not a member of the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the new regime of Mirziyoyev points to a restart in Russian-Uzbek relations, as the countries held this year the first joint bilateral military exercises in 10 years.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Uzbekistan expressed interest in supporting Russian peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Stronski, "Turkmenistan at Twenty-Five: The High Price of Authoritarianism", *Carnegie Endowment*, accessed 13 September 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/01/30/turkmenistan-at-twenty-five-high-price-of-authoritarianism-pub-67839>

<sup>14</sup> Kamila Aliyeva, "Uzbek army strongest in the region - GFP rating", *TREND News Agency*, accessed 6 September 2017, <https://en.trend.az/casia/uzbekistan/2792428.html>

<sup>15</sup> Connor Dilleen, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: insurmountable obstacles and unmanageable risks?", *ASPI*, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-belt-road-initiative-central-asia-insurmountable-obstacles-unmanageable-risks/>

<sup>16</sup> *Why is there tension between China and the Uighurs?*, BBC World News, accessed 4 August 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-26414014>

<sup>17</sup> Roncveert Ganan Almond, "Summits, Roads and Suspended Disbelief in Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, accessed 5 August 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/06/summits-roads-and-suspended-disbelief-in-central-asia/>

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Uzbekistan and Russia to Restart Joint Military Exercises", *Eurasianet*, accessed 8 July 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/84206>

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Russia and Uzbekistan's Renewed Security Partnership", *The Diplomat*, accessed 11 September 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/russia-and-uzbekistans-renewed-security-partnership/>

Uzbekistan has been one of the opaque states in the region during the past 25 years and cooperation was restricted by the border demarcation disputes it had with Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which have gone largely unsolved under the Karimov regime. However, the official new policy is to achieve greater regional cooperation and stability<sup>20</sup>. Uzbek authorities have already started settling part of the disputes, such as Kyrgyz-Uzbek border delimitation,<sup>21</sup> yet there are several other unsolved matters inherited from the old regime, such as the water disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the Ferghana Valley's instability, securing the Afghan border and so on.

On its end, Tajikistan is the regional state with highest position in the Fragile States Index, 61<sup>st</sup>/178, and ranked last in terms of military power in the Global Fire Power rating of 2017. Also, economically, it depends on Russian and Chinese investments.

Reliant on Russia for its defence capabilities, Tajikistan is part of the CSTO and the SCO. Moreover, in 2016, Tajikistan joined China's first military initiative in Central Asia- the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, that bypasses Russia, which is relevant as Tajikistan hosts the largest of Russia's military bases abroad<sup>22</sup>, as well as an US military base<sup>23</sup>. The US holds annual exercises jointly with the host, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia<sup>24</sup> and cooperates under the NATO Partnership for Peace framework. Additionally, in 2016, China held its first bilateral military exercise with Tajikistan, and funded the construction of a border guard training centre, 11 posts on the frontier and a joint Chinese-Tajik anti-terror centre in Dunshabe<sup>25</sup>. However, the Tajiks remain cautious as a latent territorial dispute

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<sup>20</sup> *Briefing No 84 Uzbekistan: Reform or Repeat?*, The International Crisis Group, accessed 4 August 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/uzbekistan/84-uzbekistan-reform-or-repeat>

<sup>21</sup> "Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan preferred to resolve border issue secretly", *Eurasia News*, accessed 11 September 2017, <http://eurasianews.info/en/important/uzbekistan-and-kyrgyzstan-preferred-to-resolve-border-issue-secretly.html>

<sup>22</sup> "Stans undelivered", *The Economist*, accessed 5 August 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21701522-five-former-soviet-republics-struggle-survive-new-great-game-stans-undelivered>

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Putz, "What Does CENTCOM Care About in Central Asia?", *The Diplomat*, accessed 7 August 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/in-2017-what-does-centcom-care-about-in-central-asia/>

<sup>24</sup> Nadin Bahrom, "Joint military exercise underscores common challenges to Central Asia", *Central Asia News*, accessed 10 September 2017, [http://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2017/07/21/feature-01](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/07/21/feature-01)

<sup>25</sup> Alexandr Kniazev, "КАРТ-БЛАШ. Кутай приступает к созданию военного альянса в Центральной Азии", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, accessed 10 August 2017, [http://www.ng.ru/world/2016-03-15/3\\_kartblansh.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2016-03-15/3_kartblansh.html)

led to allowing China annex over 1% of its territory<sup>26</sup>, which included the strategic Wakhan Corridor, and talks on the matter resurface periodically. Separately, Russia and its allies held in Tajikistan exercises that are usually conducted under the CSTO framework, this time under the Commonwealth of Independent States Anti-Terrorism Centre, which also includes former CSTO-member, Uzbekistan, indicating an improvement in Russian-Uzbek relations.<sup>27</sup>

### **Strategic Hedging – Central Asia's response to growing multipolarity**

As the reminiscent structures of the former USSR are slowly morphing so that Central Asian states adapt to an increasingly multipolar region, we also note a change in their defence strategies. The traditional main alignment options when faced with a security dilemma used to limit the smaller states' approaches to mostly traditional bandwagoning or balancing. However, the anarchic trend present in the regional security complex<sup>28</sup> and the historical mistrust these countries have between each other, meant that smaller states would need to adopt a pro-active role to fulfil their national strategic objectives.

A characteristic of the security dynamics of the region is the interlink between the economy and defence sectors. Consequently, both China and Russia, as the main players of the New Great Game use, on one hand, economic initiatives, such as the Silk Road Belt or the Economic Eurasian Union, and on the other, military alliances as vehicles to expand their spheres of influence regionally. This knowledge posed a challenge to the weaker Central Asian countries, whose agendas include both strengthening their own security and stability, as well as economic development and market access. However, neither continuing isolation, nor overt alignment with solely one player are feasible alternatives to achieve all their individual goals.

Therefore, as a reaction to the new geopolitical configuration, in order to amass all their opportunities without challenging Russia as the historical main player in the region, nor antagonize China, the largest regional investor, smaller states like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have adopted a mix of strategies known as hedging, which combine elements of the more traditional approaches, such as bandwagoning or high-intensity balancing.

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<sup>26</sup> Fuad Shahbazov, "China's Economic and Military Expansion in Tajikistan", *The Diplomat*, accessed 3 August 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/chinas-economic-and-military-expansion-in-tajikistan/>

<sup>27</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Russia Holds Military Exercises in Tajikistan -- But Why Not With CSTO?", *Eurasianet*, accessed 11 September 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/83781>

<sup>28</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma", *World Politics*, Vol. 30, Issue 2, 1978, pp 167-214

In the classical sense described by the international relations theories<sup>29</sup>, bandwagoning would entail a clear strategic alignment with one state and its interests, either Russia or China, whilst balancing would imply an alignment with other regional states in response to the rise of a new larger player, here meaning China. Neither is suitable by itself for the priorities of smaller Central Asian countries in the current regional landscape. Firstly, both theories limit these states' capacity to adopt a more active role in engaging all the players that partake in the New Great Game. This is one of the reasons which led Uzbekistan to exit the CSTO in 2012. Secondly, bandwagoning would restrict which economic and military alliance a smaller state can approach. Moreover, as we have shown, neither of the three (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) have shown complete alignment with either Russia, nor with China. Trends indicate that each state prefers to cooperate bilaterally on defined issues and avoid falling under the umbrella of a sole player. Thirdly, while all three states do apply certain elements of internal and external balancing in increasing both their military power, as well as form certain alliances, particularly to tackle the Taliban and Jihadi threat, mistrust and suspicion of the intentions of their neighbours mean that all observed states generally avoid fully integrating in rule-based regional organizations. Bilateral engagements are preferred instead. However, some exceptions do apply for example in Tajikistan, as the country's weak military cannot properly secure its borders and requires a high degree of assistance. Nevertheless, it is not advantageous for either of the three countries analysed to overtly balance against China, the challenger of the regional hierarchy, as they all depend economically on its investments, especially in the context of Russia's current economic decline. Nor is it advantageous to do so against Russia, as they depend on its military assistance, market, and on the remittances from Central Asian migrants' seasonal work on Russian soil.

Hedging initially appeared as an evolved soft balancing method, which allows a weaker state to improve its competitiveness while avoiding confrontation with larger players<sup>30</sup>. This strategy comprises a mix of measures that allow policy shifts from one issue to another, according to the state's best interest. Some analysts argue that hedging is most advantageous for smaller, weaker states that are more likely to prefer limited cooperation over zero-sum games in security matters.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Stephen Walt, "Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning", accessed 15 July 2017, available at <http://www.ou.edu/uschina/texts/WaltAlliances.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Gustaaf Geeraerts, Mohammad Salman, "Measuring Strategic Hedging Capability of Second-Tier States Under Unipolarity", *Chinese Political Science Review*, Vol.1, No.1, 2016, pp. 62

<sup>31</sup> Evelyn Goh, "Understanding "hedging" in Asia-Pacific security", *PacNet*, No 43, 2006, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/media/csis/pubs/pac0643.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/pac0643.pdf)

Central Asia's circumstances are similar to those of Southeast Asian<sup>32</sup> states, which are caught mainly between the Chinese and American spheres of influence. As such, the common patterns<sup>33</sup> between the two regions are not aligning overtly in favour of one major player, even though each state's objectives and general strategies may vary. ASEAN states such as Malaysia<sup>34</sup> have long adopted a hedging strategy as response to China's regional engagement, and chose to cooperate with both major powers to strengthen their security and stability. However, the Asian hedging trends differ from the mainly balancing strategies adopted by smaller states in regions such as the Middle East, which become clear in their policies towards Iran, for example.

By adopting an early strategic hedging measurement overview<sup>35</sup>, we note that Central Asian states' policies are an answer to the changes in the regional power balance and the uncertainty that comes with it. First of all, all three countries maintain cooperation with Russia, the current dominant leader, on specific issues, while at the same time they adopt supply and demand diversification policies in order to decrease dependency in vital sectors, such as energy exports or arms purchasing. Second of all, all three countries are taking measures to improve their military capabilities and bilateral alliances in order to build resilience in case of the potential loss of Russian security assistance, thus, actively altering the current regional military balance. Nevertheless, Russia still dominates the defence sector, particularly as the disintegration of the Islamic State rose concerns regarding the implications of the Central Asian's Jihadi's return to their native countries. Moreover, Sinophobia is still present in the region, making smaller states suspicious of China's intense economic and military endeavours. The questions are multiplied by restrictive Chinese policies, such as imposing Chinese national workers in building the infrastructure projects financed through the BRI.

After gaining its independence, Turkmenistan had an atypical evolution. To protect its territorial integrity, it chose to adopt a positive

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<sup>32</sup> Olli Suorsa, "Maintaining a Small State's Strategic Space: Omnidirectional Hedging" *International Studies Association Hong Kong*, accessed 14 July 2017, <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/f40db849-cb90-4826-9b7a-e449b602f398.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Evelyn Goh, "Southeast Asian Strategies toward the Great Powers: Still Hedging after All These Years?", *The ASEAN Forum*, accessed 10 July 2017, <http://www.theaseanforum.org/southeast-asian-strategies-toward-the-great-powers-still-hedging-after-all-these-years/>

<sup>34</sup> CHENG-CHWEE, K. (2008). "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China.", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30(2), pp 159-185

<sup>35</sup> Gustaaf Geeraerts, Mohammad Salman, "Measuring Strategic Hedging Capability of Second-Tier States Under Unipolarity", *Chinese Political Science Review*, Vol.1, No.1, 2016, pp. 62

neutrality doctrine and to position itself as a peaceful and stable pylon in a region fuelled by territorial and interethnic disputes. This policy allowed the country to avoid regional military alliances and, as such, it did not need to neatly adopt a traditional bandwagoning or balancing approach to ensure its defence needs. However, Turkmenistan has been dependent on Russian aid to secure its territory, arms purchasing and troops training. In addition, due to the Turkmen's proactivity to border security and Taliban threats, we can eliminate buck-passing as main strategy as well. Its security is built on bilateral alliances, yet it does not currently limit itself to cooperating with a single major power. It cooperates with Russia to compensate their defence capabilities' shortages, with China and Turkey for weapon's purchase, with Pakistan for ensuring the security of its strategic TAPI project construction. Therefore, Turkmenistan hedges based on its official neutrality to secure military assistance from various players without making any formal commitment. Noteworthy, security is intrinsically linked to the vital energy sector, which will affect the country's behaviour and regional ties, proof of which is a spike in weapons purchase diversification, which were formerly obtained from Russia, after the Russians stopped Turkmen gas imports. Despite this, as the small Caspian state does not have the full military capabilities necessary to respond to the increase in Taliban activity at its southern border, it has continued a close military cooperation with the Russian Federation. Additionally, it responded to the disadvantageous demands of the Russian's regarding gas prices by increasing cooperation with China instead.

Uzbekistan, on the other hand, under Karimov's regime isolated itself both from its neighbours, as well as from former major allies and, as a consequence, it did not actively seek a pivotal role, as it could have, in the Russian-Chinese security dilemma. However, under its new leadership, Uzbekistan has made significant changes in its foreign policy and security priorities, its reach to both Russia and China indicating a similar choice to that of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan of leveraging its position to gain a more competitive advantage in the region. Its geographical position, resources and powerful military makes it essential to both military and economic alliances forged by China and Russia.

Though the early defence strategy of Tajikistan was bandwagoning, its strategic position at the frontline of the Afghan conflict, internal turbulence, the multipolar New Great Game evolutions and the periphery position in Russia's backyard meant that the country could leverage its weak, non-threatening position to gain significant more military and economic aid from all the countries that had an interest in easy access to Afghanistan. Therefore,

the Tajik government increased military cooperation both with Russia and with China, as well as with the United States. However, as bandwagoning was no longer advantageous and sole balancing not feasible on the long term, a mix of strategies was preferred. As such, Tajikistan remains one of Russia's closest allies in Central Asia, yet it simultaneously entered a newly formed military alliance with China that excludes it and the NATO Partnership for Peace. Thus, contrasting its neighbours, the Tajiks adopt omnidirectional hedging as they try to maximize military aid and capitalize any investments that are made on their territory.

### Conclusions

To sum up and conclude, the mixed strategy adopted by Central Asian countries is a result of the increased uncertainty, mistrust, and caution towards the regional ambitions of New Great Game players, as well as an intention to leverage their position to gain a more advantageous role in the changing configuration. Since the complexity and high interdependence of the regional relations prevent overt alignment with either Russia or China, all three states analysed are expected to hedge between both players, using specific needs that change from issue to issue as incentive.<sup>36</sup>

As a consequence, small states such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will play a more active role in security dilemmas caused by similar dynamics, as their alignment options on either defence or economic matters could cause a shift in the regional power balance and intentionally allow a significant overlap of spheres of influence.

Moreover, as frontline states to an active warzone, all three countries will and should have as priority to advance their security agenda, while their choices could destabilize the entire region. The security risks are heightened by the persistent Taliban threat, interethnic tensions, and the risk of Islamic radicalization. The latter is caused by the return of Central Asian fighters back home after Daesh's loss of terrain and financing, and fostered by both the precarious economic conditions that increase popular restlessness, as well as the severe crackdown on Islamic symbols and traditions in countries such as Tajikistan. In addition, Russia's justifications for the recent territorial annexations in Ukraine and military doctrine have caused concerns of a potential scenario being repeated in Central Asia, as the significant size of the Russian communities there could create an incentive for Moscow for an

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<sup>36</sup> Van Jackson, "The Rise and Persistence of Strategic Hedging across Asia: A System-Level Analysis", *Strategic Asia 2014-2015, US alliances and partnerships at the Center of Global Power, The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2014*

intervention if the instability level increases. Also, Uzbekistan's large Uyghur community has caused friction in its relationship with China, as the latter has been accused of interfering into the small country's internal affairs by demanding a tighter supervision of this minority's activity and ties to the Uyghur in Xinjiang.

Strategic hedging between the main players to maximize opportunities is the key for these small Central Asian states to strengthen their defence and maintain a stable environment. This would allow the current regimes to further develop their countries and prevent any foreign intervention or military conflict on their territory. However, their decisions and alliances should be chosen wisely and in accordance with the strategic agenda of big actors such as Russia and China.

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan chose to hedge between large players to protect their national integrity, but how will Russia or China react when a decision of one of these states would affect its regional interests?

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