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Geopolitical Dynamics in the Twenty-First Century

Sheraz Mehmood

sheraz1980mm@gmail.com

Western Caspian University

Mahsati Jafarova

Baku Business University

Subhan Talibli

Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University

Aygun Kamandari

Baku Business University

Mehriban Malikova

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Abstract

Global geopolitics has undergone a significant transformation in the context of the New Cold War, marked by a gradual shift away from direct military confrontation toward economic competition, technological rivalry, and hybrid warfare strategies. Against this backdrop, this study investigates the evolving power dynamics in Central Asia, a strategically pivotal region situated at the intersection of the competing interests of the United States, China, and Russia. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study engages with key geopolitical theories, including economic interdependence, regional security complex theory, and the concept of multi-vector foreign policy. Through this theoretical lens, the research analyzes how structural changes in the international system shape Central Asia's geopolitical positioning. The findings indicate that trade realignments, growing cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and increasing patterns of economic dependence play a decisive role in influencing the region's strategic orientation. Furthermore, the study highlights the ways in which strategic alliances, hybrid warfare mechanisms, and rapid technological advancements contribute to the reconfiguration of the contemporary global order. Based on these findings, the study proposes several policy recommendations aimed at enhancing regional stability and autonomy. These include trade diversification, the strengthening of cybersecurity infrastructure, the maintenance of diplomatic neutrality, and the promotion of regional cooperation as essential pillars of sustainable self-governance. In the context of an increasingly multipolar international system, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Central Asia can navigate intensifying geopolitical pressures while safeguarding long-term economic resilience and strategic independence.

Introduction

Global geopolitical dynamics have shifted markedly in the twenty-first century, prompting scholars and policymakers to debate the utility of the "New Cold War" as an interpretive framework. Unlike the twentieth-century Cold War, defined by a bipolar standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, the contemporary environment is characterized by multiplex tensions among major powers—principally the United States, China, and Russia—across ideological, economic, technological, and informational domains. These competitive interactions raise consequential questions for the stability of the global economy and the trajectory of international order.

Within this context, the term "New Cold War" has gained salience as a heuristic for interpreting intensifying strategic rivalry, especially between the United States and China. This rivalry manifests in trade disputes, technology controls and standards-setting, and evolving military postures (Niblett, 2024). Importantly, dense patterns of economic interdependence have not attenuated competition; rather, they have complicated it. Recent assessments suggest a partial fragmentation of trade and investment along geopolitical lines, driven by national-security and supply-chain resilience considerations and prompting a recalibration of international economic ties (International Monetary Fund, 2024).

Technological rivalry further exacerbates tensions. Contests over leadership in artificial intelligence, next-generation telecommunications (e.g., 5G), and cybersecurity have placed standards, norms, and data governance at the center of power competition, extending well beyond market share to encompass ideological influence and national security externalities. Beyond the U.S.–China dyad, a broader repertoire of geopolitical–geoeconomic instruments—notably infrastructure finance and connectivity strategies—has emerged as a means of projecting influence and shaping regional orders (Schindler et al., 2021). This turn foregrounds corridors, platforms, and standards over traditional containment logics.

Central Asia occupies a strategic position within this evolving landscape. Owing to its geography, resource endowments, and corridor potential, the region sits at the intersection of the interests of major powers and regional stakeholders. Understanding how "New Cold War" dynamics materialize in Central Asia is thus crucial to assessing the region's options for maintaining stability, autonomy, and long-term resilience.

Research aim. This study analyzes the economic, technological, and strategic dimensions of contemporary great-power competition and their implications for Central Asia. It advances an integrated framework that draws on geopolitical theory, the regional security complex approach, multi-vector foreign policy, economic interdependence, and soft power/cultural diplomacy to explain how regional actors navigate external pressures while exercising agency.

Research questions.
RQ1: How do geoeconomic fragmentation and technology decoupling shape Central Asia's external alignments and internal policy choices?
RQ2: How does the regional security complex mediate the transmission of great-power rivalry into local security practices and institutions?
RQ3: Under what conditions does multi-vector foreign policy enhance strategic autonomy versus deepen dependence?

Methodological note. The study employs a qualitative approach, synthesizing theoretical literatures and policy analyses to trace mechanisms linking systemic rivalry to regional outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual architecture integrates five complementary perspectives—geopolitical theory, multi-vector foreign policy, regional security complex theory (RSCT), economic interdependence/geoeconomics, and soft power/cultural diplomacy—to capture the multidimensionality of competition and agency in Central Asia.

2.1. The "New Cold War" Through a Geopolitical Lens

Geopolitical theory provides first-order insights into great-power competition in the twenty-first century. The "New Cold War" is often used to denote a resurgence of rivalry—military, ideological, and economic—

among the United States, China, and Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014). Contemporary practice emphasizes positional competition leveraging military presence, strategic partnerships, and technological dominance rather than rigid bloc confrontation.

Central Asia functions as a geopolitical pivot due to its connective geography, energy reserves, and corridor potential (Cooley, 2019). Major powers have favored geoeconomic instruments—such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—to consolidate influence (Kaczmarski, 2017). Crucially, Central Asian states are not passive recipients; they shape outcomes by sequencing reforms, negotiating terms, and calibrating alignments to protect sovereignty and extract benefits.

2.2. Multi-Vector Foreign Policy and Strategic Autonomy

Multi-vector foreign policy captures how Central Asian states balance relations with multiple external powers to secure economic opportunities and security guarantees while preserving autonomy (Laruelle, 2018). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for example, engage simultaneously with China, Russia, and Western partners to diversify trade, investment, and security cooperation (Engvall & Laruelle, 2020). The efficacy of this strategy hinges on diplomatic bandwidth, institutional capacity, and the ability to manage great-power expectations without incurring prohibitive dependency or retaliation risks. In a tightening strategic environment, multi-vectorism functions as both hedging and positioning.

2.3. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

RSCT posits that security interdependencies are regionally clustered and that local actors play decisive roles in shaping outcomes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In Central Asia, security dynamics reflect the interplay of:

- Internal drivers: regime stability, elite cohesion, border demarcation and disputes, water and resource governance, ethnic tensions.
- External drivers: Russia's security footprint, China's evolving security engagement (e.g., via the SCO), periodic U.S./NATO involvement, and adjacent conflicts and spillovers.

Empirically, Russia's military presence in Tajikistan and China's security cooperation under the SCO underscore the region's salience in the broader rivalry (Allison, 2017). Regional organizations such as the CSTO address cross-border threats (e.g., terrorism, narcotics), but their effectiveness varies by mandate and member commitment. RSCT illuminates how regional institutions and bilateral pacts filter systemic pressures, sometimes dampening and at other times amplifying external rivalry.

2.4. Geoeconomics: Interdependence, Leverage, and Fragmentation

Economic interdependence shapes incentives and vulnerabilities in the New Cold War context. Major powers employ energy trade, critical minerals, standards, and infrastructure finance to project influence

(Starr & Cornell, 2018). Central Asia's hydrocarbon reserves, mining potential, and transit corridors position it as a nodal economy in Eurasian supply chains.

China's BRI has financed transport, energy, and digital infrastructure with the twin goals of connectivity and supply security (Rolland, 2020). Russia wields influence through the EEU and pipeline networks. Meanwhile, signs of geoeconomic fragmentation—export controls, investment screening, and friend-shoring—create both risks (exposure to coercion, stranded assets) and opportunities (diversification, value-added upgrading). The central question is how Central Asian governments leverage negotiating power—via sequencing, transparency, and competitive bidding—to convert interdependence into strategic advantage rather than asymmetric dependence.

2.5. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

Soft power—"the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2011)—has become integral to competitive statecraft. China promotes Confucius Institutes and Mandarin programs; Russia mobilizes Russian-language media and educational networks (Laruelle, 2019). Central Asian states increasingly invest in counter-narratives and identity-building: Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol advances infrastructure and a cohesive national vision; Uzbekistan deploys cultural heritage, tourism, and arts diplomacy to broaden partnerships (Koch, 2020). Soft power interacts with geoeconomics: infrastructure and education initiatives often come bundled with values, norms, and narratives that shape public opinion and elite preferences.

2.6. Integrating the Framework: Key Relationships

The framework emphasizes the co-evolution of geopolitical, economic, security, and cultural logics:

- Geopolitics × Multi-Vectorism: Balancing among competing powers operationalizes strategic autonomy but requires institutional capacity and credible neutrality.
- Interdependence × RSCT: Economic linkages and security interdependencies co-determine alignment choices, crisis responses, and institutional design.
- Soft Power × Geoeconomics: Cultural diplomacy and media ecosystems often track investment flows, reinforcing (or contesting) influence.

Figure 1 (conceptual, for the paper): An integrated schematic positioning Central Asia at the center, with four concentric or interlocking domains (geopolitics, RSCT, geoeconomics, soft power), and directional arrows indicating feedback loops (e.g., tech controls → trade realignment → security cooperation shifts → narrative competition).

The framework is based on the Geopolitical Theory, which emphasizes Central Asia's strategic importance in the changing global order and fuels competition among superpowers.

Since Central Asian nations strategically balance outside influences while tackling regional security issues, the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy and Regional Security Complex Theory are closely related. Their

military and diplomatic stance in reaction to international tensions is determined by this interaction.

Soft power and economic interdependence work together as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that use trade policies, cultural diplomacy, and economic investments to increase influence and mold regional narratives.

The central goal of the framework is represented by the Central Asian Agency & Outcomes component, which focuses on how Central Asian countries negotiate geopolitical rivalry to attain stability, independence, and sustainable development in a world that is becoming more and more divided.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to investigate the geopolitical tensions associated with the New Cold War, with a particular focus on Central Asia. Given the complexity, multidimensionality, and context-dependent nature of contemporary international relations, a qualitative approach is well suited to capturing the strategic calculations, perceptions, and policy responses of regional actors. The research design integrates case study analysis, document analysis, content analysis, and expert interviews, allowing for methodological triangulation and enhanced analytical validity.

3.1. Research Design

The study employs a comparative case study design, which enables an in-depth examination of the political, economic, and security dynamics shaping Central Asia's positioning within the New Cold War (Cooley, 2019). This design is particularly appropriate for exploring how abstract theoretical constructs—such as geopolitical theory, multi-vector foreign policy, and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)—are operationalized in concrete regional contexts (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Rather than treating Central Asia as a homogeneous unit, the research acknowledges intra-regional variation and state-specific strategies. This approach allows for analytical sensitivity to differences in foreign policy orientation, institutional capacity, and exposure to external pressures, while still identifying shared structural constraints imposed by great-power competition.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

Sampling Strategy and Study Population

The study draws on purposive sampling, targeting individuals with demonstrable expertise in geopolitics, international relations, security studies, and economic policy. A total of 105 participants from diverse geographical and professional backgrounds were included to ensure analytical breadth and sectoral balance. Participants were selected from academia, government and policy circles, business sectors, research institutions, and related professional domains.

This sampling strategy enables the inclusion of informed perspectives on how the New Cold War manifests in Central Asia, particularly regarding technological competition, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, economic dependence, hybrid strategies, and diplomatic maneuvering.

Sample Composition

The respondent pool consists of:

- 40 university faculty members,
- 28 academic researchers,
- 9 government and policy professionals,
- 8 private-sector representatives,
- 20 participants from other relevant professional fields.

While the study is primarily qualitative in orientation, the size and diversity of the sample allow for limited descriptive aggregation alongside in-depth interpretive analysis. This composition enhances the credibility and transferability of findings across policy and scholarly audiences.

Document Analysis

To establish a robust contextual and historical foundation, the study conducts a systematic review of:

- peer-reviewed academic literature on great-power rivalry and geopolitics (Mearsheimer, 2014),
- policy documents related to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Kaczmarski, 2017),
- security frameworks and institutional arrangements such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Allison, 2017).

These sources are analyzed to trace evolving patterns of influence, institutional design, and strategic intent in the region.

Content Analysis

A qualitative content analysis is conducted on official speeches, policy statements, and strategic documents issued by Central Asian governments, as well as by major external actors including the United States, China, and Russia (Engvall & Laruelle, 2020). This method facilitates the identification of dominant narratives, policy priorities, and discursive shifts related to sovereignty, security, connectivity, and alignment.

Expert Interviews

To complement documentary sources, semi-structured interviews were conducted with scholars, policymakers, and regional experts specializing in Central Asia. Interview protocols focused on:

- the effectiveness and limits of multi-vector foreign policy,
- the role of economic interdependence in shaping regional stability,
- emerging security challenges linked to great-power competition and hybrid threats (Laruelle, 2018).

This approach allows respondents to elaborate on causal mechanisms and strategic trade-offs that may not be evident in official texts.

3.3. Data Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis to systematically code and interpret data collected from documents, policy texts, and interviews (Rolland, 2020). Through iterative coding, recurring themes are identified across four core dimensions:

1. foreign policy strategies,
2. economic interdependence and leverage,
3. security challenges and institutional responses,
4. shifts in geopolitical power and regional agency.

This process enables analytical pattern recognition while remaining attentive to contextual nuance (Starr & Cornell, 2018).

3.4. Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

Findings are interpreted through the combined application of three complementary theoretical lenses:

- Geopolitical Theory explains the strategic significance of Central Asia and the competitive interactions among the United States, China, and Russia (Cooley, 2019).
- Multi-Vector Foreign Policy assesses how Central Asian states engage multiple external actors to maximize autonomy while mitigating dependency risks (Laruelle, 2018).
- Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) elucidates how regional security interdependencies and external pressures jointly shape defense and security policies (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The integration of these perspectives allows for a multidimensional assessment of Central Asia's political, economic, and security positioning within the New Cold War (Kaczmarski, 2017).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to established ethical standards. All interview participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was ensured to protect identities and encourage candid responses (Engvall &

Laruelle, 2020). Secondary sources and policy documents were critically evaluated to minimize bias and enhance analytical reliability.

3.6. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged:

- The reliance on expert judgment and secondary sources may introduce interpretive bias (Rolland, 2020).
- Given the dynamic nature of geopolitical relations, findings reflect a specific temporal context and may evolve as strategic conditions change (Starr & Cornell, 2018).

Despite these constraints, the qualitative design provides deep contextual insight into how Central Asian states navigate great-power rivalry and contributes meaningfully to scholarly and policy debates.

Results and Findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the study concerning perceptions of the New Cold War and its implications for Central Asian states. In line with best practices in qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research, the results are organized into two complementary subsections. First, responses to closed-ended survey questions are analyzed to identify general patterns and distributions. Second, open-ended responses are thematically examined to capture deeper interpretive insights and contextual nuances.

4.1. Analysis of Survey Responses (Closed-Ended Questions)

a. Knowledge and Perceptions of the New Cold War

The survey assessed respondents' levels of familiarity with the concept of the "New Cold War" and their perceptions of its primary drivers. As summarized in Table 1, the responses indicate variation in levels of awareness, alongside a broadly shared recognition of intensified great-power rivalry in the contemporary international system.

Overall, respondents demonstrate a moderate to high degree of conceptual familiarity, suggesting that the notion of a New Cold War has gained analytical traction across academic, policy, and professional communities. Perceptions of causality converge around economic competition, technological rivalry, and strategic realignments, while traditional military confrontation is viewed as a secondary or indirect factor. This pattern supports existing scholarship that characterizes the New Cold War as a hybrid and multidimensional phenomenon rather than a direct replication of twentieth-century bipolar confrontation.

Importantly, the distribution of responses reflects sectoral differentiation. Participants with academic and research backgrounds tend to emphasize structural and theoretical drivers, whereas respondents from policy and business sectors are more likely to foreground trade fragmentation, supply-chain risks, and technology governance. This divergence underscores the value of incorporating heterogeneous expert perspectives when assessing geopolitical transformations.

Table 1. Levels of Familiarity with the Concept of the New Cold War

Question	Response	Percentage (%)
Familiar with the term "New Cold War"	Very familiar	36%
	Somewhat familiar	45%
	Heard of it but unclear	13%
	Not familiar	11%
Primary driver of geopolitical tensions	Economic competition	35%
	Technological advancement	33%
	Military build-ups	12%
	Ideological differences	18%
Likelihood of tensions escalating into global conflict (1–5 scale)	Average rating	3.70

With economic and technological factors emerging as the primary geopolitical drivers, the majority of respondents acknowledged the New Cold War. The results of the survey show that most people are aware of the New Cold War, with 36% being very familiar and 45% being somewhat familiar, 13% having heard about it but not knowing what it was, and 11% not knowing. Economic rivalry (35%) and technological development (33%) were identified as the main causes of geopolitical tensions, followed by ideological disagreements (18%) and military buildups (12%). A moderate-to-high risk perception was indicated by respondents' average rating of 3.70 for the possibility that tensions would escalate into a world war.

b. The Impact of Technology on World Politics

Participants' opinions on how technology is changing global power structures were investigated in the survey. Table 2 provides a summary of their answers.

Table 2 The Impact of Technology on World Politics

Question	Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
How is technology shaping global politics?	Tech dominance (AI, semiconductors)	70	66.7%
	Cyberattacks & misinformation	52	49.5%
	Shaping alliances & tech wars	44	41.9%
	Diplomatic & military strategies	38	36.2%
Are technological advancements more critical than military power?	Yes	81	81%
	No	7	7%
	Not sure	17	17%

The majority of respondents (81%) think that the military might no longer shape contemporary geopolitical strategies as much as technological advancements do. The survey's findings demonstrate how important technology is in influencing world politics. Most respondents (66.7%) cited tech dominance in fields like artificial intelligence and semiconductors as a major factor, followed by worries about misinformation and cyberattacks (49.5%), changing alliances and tech wars (41.9%), and military and diplomatic plans (36.2%). Interestingly, 81% of respondents believed that technological developments were more important than conventional military might in affecting geopolitical dynamics, highlighting the expanding role of technology in contemporary international relations.

c. Important Figures and Coalitions in the New Cold War

As shown in Table 3, the survey determined the main international players and emphasized the perceived significance of strategic alliances in influencing contemporary geopolitics.

Table 3 Important Figures and Coalitions in the New Cold War

Question	Response	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Which countries/regions are primary players?	United States	84	80%
	China	68	64.8%
	Russia	58	55.2%
	European Union	36	34.3%
How significant are alliances (NATO, BRICS, AUKUS)?	Extremely significant	36	36%
	Somewhat significant	44	44%
	Neutral	13	13%
	Minimal	8	8%
	Not significant	4	4%

Global politics are dominated by the US, China, and Russia, and alliances are essential to determining geopolitical tactics. According to the survey results, participants named the United States (80%), China (64.8%), and Russia (55.2%) as the main participants in the New Cold War. The European Union (34.3%) was also acknowledged as a major player. Only a small percentage of respondents saw alliances as neutral (13%), minimal (8%), or insignificant (4%), underscoring the crucial role that strategic partnerships play in shaping global power dynamics. Most respondents thought that alliances like NATO, BRICS, and AUKUS were either somewhat significant (44%) or extremely significant (36%).

d. The Outward Signs of Geopolitical Unrest

Table 4 summarizes the most significant effects of the New Cold War that the participants identified.

Table 4 Geopolitical Tensions' Perceptible Effects

Consequence	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Economic instability	65	61.9%
Cyberattacks	58	55.2%
Diplomatic isolation	48	45.7%
Trade restrictions	46	43.8%
Proxy wars	45	42.9%

The two most obvious effects of growing geopolitical tensions were economic instability and cyberthreats. According to the survey's findings, respondents cited economic instability (61.9%) as the

most significant effect of geopolitical tensions, with worries about cyberattacks coming in second (55.2%). Global geopolitical conflicts present a wide range of economic, security, and diplomatic challenges. Other noteworthy effects include trade restrictions (43.8%), diplomatic isolation (45.7%), and proxy wars (42.9%).

e. Possible Remedies for Geopolitical Conflicts

As indicated in Table 5, participants expressed their opinions on the best ways to ease geopolitical tensions.

Table 5 Possible Remedies for Geopolitical Conflicts

Solution	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Diplomatic negotiations	40	38.1%
Multilateral cooperation	32	30.5%
Economic incentives	27	25.7%
Military deterrence	6	5.7%

The most successful strategies for lowering geopolitical tensions, according to respondents, were multilateral cooperation and diplomacy. According to the survey results, participants strongly preferred multilateral cooperation (30.5%) and diplomatic negotiations (38.1%) as the best ways to ease geopolitical tensions. Furthermore, military deterrence (5.7%) received little support, indicating a pronounced preference for cooperative and peaceful solutions over confrontational strategies, while economic incentives (25.7%) were viewed as a feasible strategy.

Fig. 2 shows the percentage of responses on the Y-axis and the possible solutions on the X-axis. According to the survey's findings, the two most successful methods for lowering geopolitical tensions were multilateral cooperation (30.5%) and diplomatic negotiations (38.1%). Furthermore, military deterrence (5.7%) received little support, indicating a strong preference for cooperative and peaceful solutions, whereas economic incentives (25.7%) were viewed as a useful strategy.

f. Emerging Powers' Place in World Geopolitics

The impact of emerging economies on the formation of global power structures was recognized by the participants. Table 6 provides a summary of these results.

Table 6 Emerging Powers' Place in World Geopolitics

Emerging Power	Key Contribution Identified
India	Expanding trade and infrastructure investments to counterbalance China
Turkey	Strengthening cultural and political ties with Central Asian nations
Middle Eastern Nations	Increasing investments in energy and technology sectors

Through strategic partnerships, economic might, and regional leadership, emerging economies are becoming more powerful. The survey emphasizes how emerging powers are becoming more and more significant in world geopolitics. India is renowned for its attempts to offset China's hegemony by increasing trade and infrastructure investments. While Middle Eastern countries are making major progress by investing in the energy and technology sectors, Turkey is solidifying its position by deepening its cultural and political ties with Central Asian countries.

Through strategic alliances, economic growth, and regional leadership, these emerging economies are influencing the balance of power in the world.

Takeout

One of the main fronts in the US-China-Russia power struggle is Central Asia.

The New Cold War is characterized by economic instability, cyberthreats, and hybrid warfare.

It is believed that technological developments have greater sway than conventional military might.

To maintain stability and security in Central Asia, diplomatic neutrality, regional cooperation, and economic diversification are essential.

This thorough analysis highlights how the geopolitical landscape is changing and how important Central Asia is in managing tensions around the world.

4.2 Thematic Examination of Unstructured Answers

a. What Are the Differences Between the Old and New Cold Wars?

Multipolar Competition: In contrast to the Cold War between the US and the USSR, tensions today involve a number of international actors.

Economic & Tech Rivalry: Trade policies, AI, and cyberwarfare have supplanted nuclear deterrence.

Hybrid Warfare & Sanctions: Economic sanctions and cyberattacks are now the go-to means of exerting influence.

Instead of using military force, AI, cyber dominance, and economic pressure are the main forces behind the New Cold War.

b. The effect on Central Asia

Economic Dependency: There is an increasing reliance on Russia (energy exports) and China (BRI).

Security Risks: Tensions between the US and China and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine increase regional instability.

Trade Disruptions: Trade routes in Central Asia are impacted by sanctions against Russia.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have to strike a balance between their economic dependence on China and Russian influence.

c. What Are Some Ways to Lower Geopolitical Tensions?

Increasing regional cooperation to lessen reliance on outside sources is one diplomatic tactic.

Economic diversification entails extending trade alliances outside of China and Russia.

Cybersecurity Measures: Putting in place more robust regulations to combat online threats.

Central Asia could be shielded from superpower meddling by a regional security alliance.

d. Emerging Powers' Function in Central Asia

India: Increasing infrastructure investments and trade to challenge China.

Turkey: Deepening political and cultural relations with Central Asian countries that speak Turkic.

Middle Eastern countries are investing more in the technology and energy sectors.

China's hegemony in Central Asia must be counterbalanced by India's economic growth.

The following are the main conclusions:

One of the main fronts in the US-China-Russia power struggle is Central Asia.

Global political strategies are being shaped by hybrid warfare and cyber threats.

The New Cold War is characterized by shifting alliances and economic instability.

Stability requires trade diversification, regional cooperation, and diplomacy.

In order to maintain regional stability, Central Asia must strategically manage international tensions while maintaining its political neutrality and economic resiliency.

Policy Remedies and Strategic Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that the New Cold War presents Central Asian states with a paradoxical landscape of constraints and opportunities. Intensifying great-power rivalry exposes the region to external pressures, yet simultaneously enhances its strategic value. To foster long-term regional stability, economic resilience, and strategic autonomy, this section outlines a set of integrated policy recommendations structured across diplomatic, economic, security, technological, and societal dimensions.

5.1. Strategic and Diplomatic Responses

Strengthening Regional Cooperation

Enhanced regional coordination emerges as a critical mechanism for mitigating the risks of becoming arenas for great-power competition. Central Asian states can amplify their collective bargaining power by deepening engagement within existing regional frameworks, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Beyond participation, institutional reform and agenda-setting within these organizations would allow Central Asian actors to shape outcomes more proactively.

Consideration should be given to the establishment of a Central Asian regional security dialogue mechanism, dedicated to coordinating responses to external pressures and managing intra-regional risks. Parallel efforts toward regional economic coordination—including trade facilitation and infrastructure interoperability—could help reduce asymmetric dependencies on external powers.

Advancing Multilateral Diplomacy

Strategic autonomy is best sustained through active multilateralism rather than isolation. Central Asian states should preserve diplomatic neutrality while broadening their international engagement across diverse multilateral platforms. Strengthening ties with non-aligned and middle-power coalitions, as well as international organizations such as the United Nations, BRICS-associated forums, and ASEAN dialogue mechanisms, can diversify diplomatic options.

Participation in international peacekeeping operations and conflict mediation initiatives can enhance global credibility and reinforce the region’s profile as a stabilizing actor rather than a contested space.

5.2. Enhancing Economic Resilience

Diversification of Trade and Investment Relations

Reducing excessive dependence on any single external partner is essential within a fragmented global economy. Expanding trade and investment linkages with emerging and middle economies—including the European Union, India, Türkiye, and Middle Eastern markets—can mitigate vulnerability to geopolitical shocks.

Policy instruments to support diversification may include the development of special economic zones (SEZs), improved logistics and customs harmonization, and participation in alternative trade corridors. Such measures strengthen economic sovereignty while reinforcing Central Asia's role as a connective hub rather than a dependent periphery.

Energy Security and Self-Sufficiency

Energy independence constitutes a foundational pillar of strategic autonomy. Investment in renewable energy—particularly hydropower, solar, and wind—can reduce reliance on external suppliers and align with global sustainability objectives. Simultaneously, diversifying hydrocarbon export routes toward South Asia, Europe, and the Middle East can dilute transit and market concentration risks.

A coordinated regional energy strategy would support long-term stability, fiscal resilience, and bargaining capacity in interactions with major powers.

5.3. Cybersecurity and Hybrid Threat Preparedness

Strengthening Cybersecurity Infrastructure

Hybrid warfare—including cyber espionage, infrastructure disruption, and information operations—has become a central instrument of geopolitical competition. Central Asian governments should prioritize the development of robust national cybersecurity architectures, supported by legal frameworks, technical capacity, and institutional coordination.

The establishment of a regional cybersecurity task force could facilitate information sharing, joint threat assessments, and coordinated response mechanisms. Investments in emerging technologies, including AI-enabled threat detection, would further strengthen defensive capabilities.

Countering Disinformation and Digital Manipulation

Information warfare increasingly targets societal cohesion and political legitimacy. Counter-disinformation strategies should integrate digital fact-checking mechanisms, media literacy education, and cooperation with international technology platforms. Public awareness campaigns aimed at strengthening critical thinking and digital resilience are essential for preserving political stability in an age of narrative competition.

5.4. Security and Defense Policy Adjustments

Enhancing Indigenous Defense Capabilities

Rather than relying exclusively on external security guarantees, Central Asian states should progressively develop indigenous defense capacities tailored to regional threat environments. Investment in defense

modernization, localized military technology, and joint training initiatives can enhance deterrence without escalating regional tensions.

Strengthening cooperative security arrangements among Central Asian states would further reduce dependence on external military patrons.

Strategic Neutrality and Conflict Avoidance

Strategic neutrality remains a viable approach for avoiding entanglement in direct superpower confrontation. Formal commitments to non-aggression, alongside the creation of regional mediation and early-warning mechanisms, can help prevent escalation of localized disputes.

Expanded participation in UN peacekeeping missions reinforces neutrality while enhancing international standing and operational experience.

5.5. Technological Innovation and Digital Sovereignty

Developing Indigenous Technological Capacity

Technological competitiveness increasingly outweighs conventional military strength in shaping global power. Central Asian states should invest in domestic technology ecosystems, including digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and semiconductor capabilities, to enhance digital sovereignty.

Collaborative innovation partnerships with technologically advanced but politically diversified partners—such as the EU, South Korea, and India—can balance access to innovation while minimizing strategic dependency.

Promoting Digital Diplomacy

Technology-centered collaboration also presents diplomatic opportunities. Establishing joint research centers and innovation hubs focused on AI, space technologies, and cybersecurity can position Central Asia as an emerging node in the global knowledge economy. Encouraging responsible foreign investment in high-tech sectors will further integrate the region into global value chains on favorable terms.

5.6. Education, Human Capital, and Societal Resilience

Investing in Human Capital Development

Long-term strategic resilience depends on education and talent development. Expanding STEM education, cybersecurity training, and geopolitical studies will prepare future policymakers, technologists, and diplomats to navigate complex global environments. Joint university programs and international exchange initiatives strengthen both skills and global networks.

Enhancing Public Awareness and Societal Literacy

Public understanding of geopolitical risks is a critical but underutilized asset. State-supported educational campaigns focusing on economic dependence, disinformation, and external influence can reinforce societal resilience. Integrating media literacy and critical thinking into national curricula will further inoculate societies against manipulation and hybrid interference.

Conclusion

This study has examined the contours of the New Cold War and its implications for Central Asia within an increasingly contested and multipolar international system. Departing from the predominantly militarized rivalry of the twentieth century, contemporary great-power competition is shaped by geoeconomic instruments, technological rivalry, and hybrid strategies. Within this evolving structure, Central Asia has emerged not merely as a passive arena of competition but as a strategically consequential region whose choices influence broader geopolitical equilibria.

The analysis demonstrates that the strategic rivalry among the United States, China, and Russia intersects in Central Asia through trade dependencies, infrastructure politics, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and shifting alliance patterns. Economic interdependence, while offering growth opportunities, simultaneously exposes the region to asymmetrical pressures, particularly in the context of increasing global fragmentation. At the same time, the expanding role of digital technologies and hybrid threats underscores cybersecurity as a core component of national and regional security.

The findings suggest that technological capacity-building, trade and investment diversification, and enhanced regional cooperation are critical to sustaining stability and strategic autonomy. Central Asian states that successfully combine economic resilience with calibrated diplomatic neutrality are better positioned to navigate competing external demands without undermining sovereignty. In this respect, multi-vector foreign policy emerges not simply as a balancing tool, but as a dynamic strategy contingent on institutional capacity, regional coordination, and access to diversified economic partnerships.

From a policy perspective, the study underscores the importance of strengthening regional frameworks, investing in indigenous technological capabilities, and engaging in strategic multilateralism beyond traditional power blocs. Such approaches can mitigate external pressures while enabling Central Asia to function as a connective and stabilizing actor within a multipolar order rather than a zone of contestation.

In contribution terms, this research advances the literature by integrating geopolitical theory, regional security complex theory, economic interdependence, and soft power analysis to explain how systemic rivalry is mediated at the regional level. It highlights Central Asia’s growing agency in shaping outcomes of the New Cold War and emphasizes the need for context-sensitive strategies that reflect both structural constraints and local policy choices. Future research may build on this framework through

comparative studies or longitudinal analyses to assess how adaptive strategies evolve as global power configurations continue to shift.

Declarations

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethics Waiver

The study titled *"Geopolitical Dynamics in the Twenty-First Century"* was reviewed by the Western Caspian University Research Ethics Committee (Baku, Azerbaijan).
The research involved a fully voluntary and anonymous online survey distributed through public and academic groups. No personal, identifiable, or sensitive data were collected, and the study posed minimal to no risk to participants.
In accordance with institutional ethical guidelines, such anonymous survey-based research does not require full ethics review. Therefore, the Committee granted an official **Ethics Waiver** for this study. *(Ethics Waiver Confirmation Letter, Western Caspian University Research Ethics Committee, 18 February 2026)*. [WCU_Ethics_Waiver | PDF]

Consent to Participate

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Before accessing the online survey link, all potential respondents were informed that participation was optional, no personal data would be collected, and they could withdraw at any time.
By voluntarily completing the questionnaire, participants provided implied informed consent.

Ethical Approval and Accordance

This study did not involve human participants, personal data, or animals. Ethical approval was therefore not required, and the research was conducted in accordance with institutional and international ethical standards.

Data Availability
The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Figures

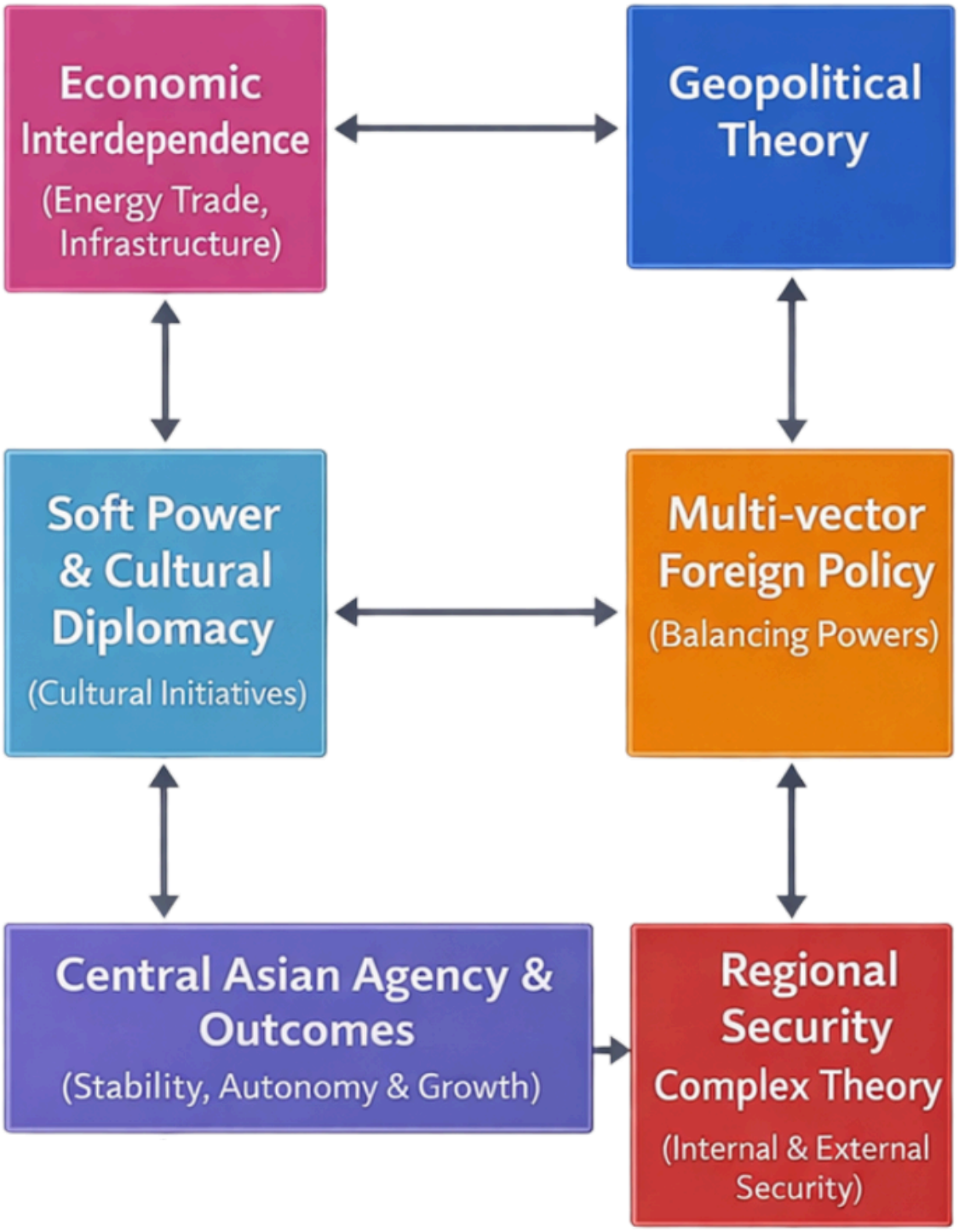


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Central Asian New Cold War Dynamics

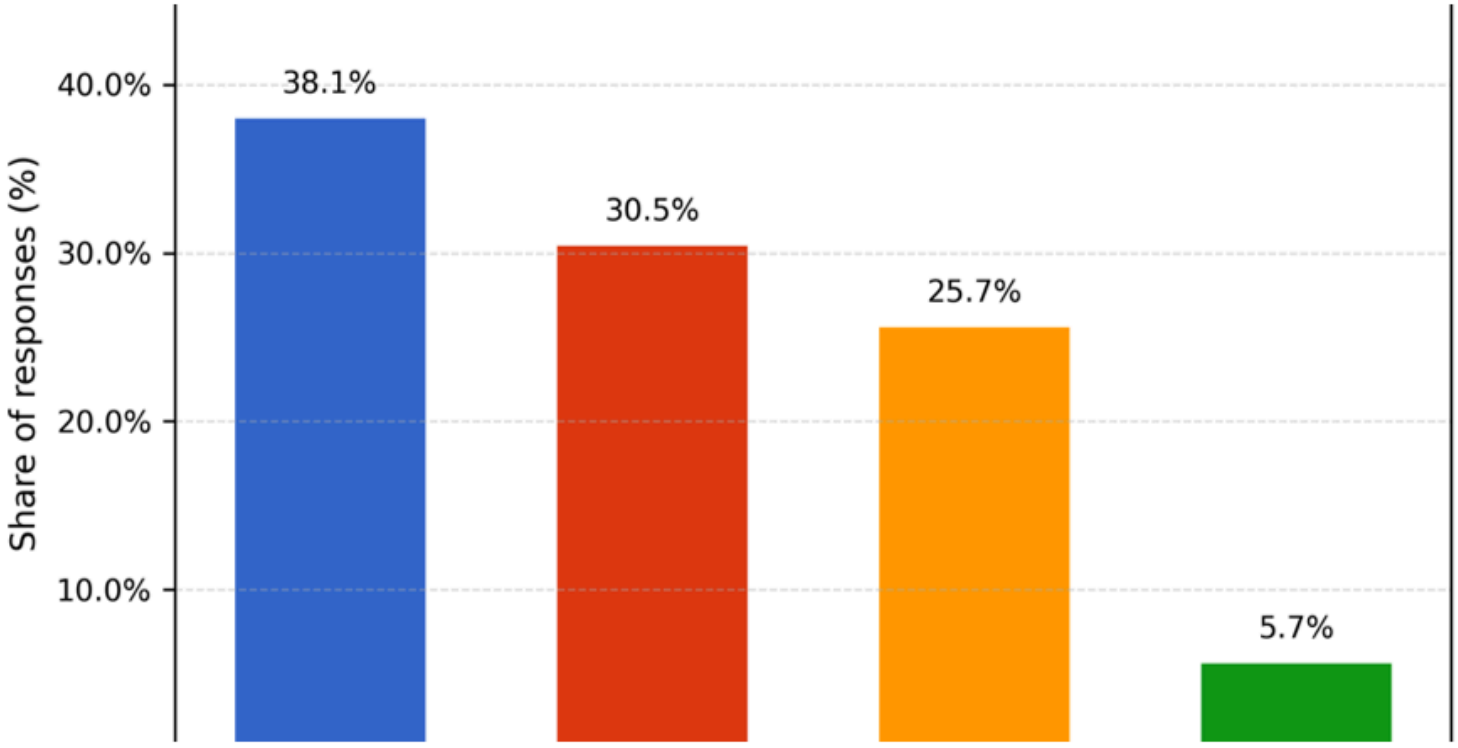


Figure 2

Possible Remedies for Geopolitical Conflicts

Supplementary Files

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