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Regional Security in Central Asia: Unravelling Central Asia's Security Complex in 2023: Assessing its Position within the Post-Soviet, Chinese, and Independent Complexes

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Regional Security in Central Asia

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within the Post-Soviet, Chinese, and Independent Complexes

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Abstract

This thesis examines the regional security dynamics in Central Asia from 2003 to 2023 using the Regional Security Complex Theory. The main focus is to determine the security complex to which Central Asia belongs in 2023. Through a qualitative analysis of security events across five multidimensional sectors, three hypotheses are evaluated: 1) Central Asia's affiliation with the Post-Soviet complex; 2) Integration into a Chinese-dominated complex; and 3) Formation of an independent regional security complex. Findings suggest that Central Asia predominantly aligns with the Post-Soviet complex. This research provides insights into the evolving security landscape and complex affiliations of Central Asia.

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List of Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CACO	Central Asian Cooperation Organization
CAR	Central Asian Republics
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CRRF	Collective Rapid Reaction Force
CST	Collective Security Treaty
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EEC	Eurasian Economic Community
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
IFAS	International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea
OCSE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PfP	Partnership for Peace
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure
RSC	Regional Security Complex
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
TIV	Trend Indicator Value
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

Central Asia has always been an interesting and important region in history. It has a rich history serving as a crossroad for different civilisations and empires, ranging from the Persians to the Mongols, to the Timurids and to the Soviets (Asimov & Bosworth, 1998; Khalid, 2022). The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union brought major political changes to the region. The emergence of five new Central Asian Republics (CAR), namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan brought new regional security dynamics. This combined with external actors trying to interfere in the region makes it a complex but interesting region for analysis.

This thesis attempts to outline the current position of Central Asia's regional security situation. It does so by utilizing Barry Buzan and Ole Waever's 2003 Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). They developed a theoretical framework in which they divide the world into multiple security regions called Regional Security Complex (RSC). They characterize the Central Asian region as a weak subcomplex within the larger Russian-dominated Post-Soviet Complex, which they noted in 2003 as unstructured and still open to future transformation (Buzan & Waever, 2003, pp. 423-426).

A review of the literature reveals that scholars have different views on who is the main security actor in Central Asia. Some authors emphasise Russia's still dominant role while others focus on China's emerging or, in some sectors, already dominant role. Then there is also a group of scholars who believe that Central Asia has broken away from the Post-Soviet Complex and begun to form its own RSC. In this context, this thesis attempts to update this theory 20 years after the last version of the RSCT was published in order to understand what the regional security situation of Central Asia will look like in 2023. This is pursued using the following research question: *To which RSC does Central Asia belong in 2023?*

Since three different perspectives on the regional security situation in this region seem to emerge from the literature, the research question will be addressed by testing three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Central Asia still belongs to the Post-Soviet complex in 2023.

Hypothesis 2: Central Asia has integrated into a Chinese security complex in 2023.

Hypothesis 3: Central Asia has broken away from the Post-Soviet complex and has formed its own independent regional security complex in 2023.

In this study, Central Asia is defined as the aforementioned five CAR that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union, a definition also adopted by the World Bank and the European Union (EUEA, 2022; World Bank Group, 2022). The study period spans from 2003 to 2023. In order to answer the research question, a qualitative study is conducted sometimes supplemented with quantitative data. The research is deductive in nature, which in the practice of this study implies, that a general overview of the regional security situation in Central Asia during the research period is given. Following this, each hypothesis is evaluated whether enough evidence was found to accept or reject the hypotheses. Elements of security are examined in this thesis more broadly than the classical military-political approach. It also includes economic, societal and environmental security dimensions, thus forming a comprehensive multidimensional view of security (Buzan et al., 1998, p. vii; Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 45).

The general security overview is primarily based on primary sources in some cases supplemented by secondary sources. The primary sources examined include key policy documents and joint statements of the countries under study, international organisations and relevant summit agreements, further some databases have been considered. The secondary sources consist of academic studies and information from think tanks.

This research is scientifically relevant because of its examination of a region as geopolitically dynamic as Central Asia. Given the significant changes in the last decades, it is crucial to gain insights into the current regional security status. This study also provides insights into the roles of two major neighbouring countries, Russia and China, in this region. Furthermore, by updating the RSCT, this thesis contributes to the ongoing academic discourse on regional security dynamics. Consequently, the findings of this study may have interesting implications for researchers interested in Central Asia and more broadly for those studying regional security complexes.

This research is organized as follows. In the next chapter, the RSCT that serves as the basis for this research is discussed in more detail, and also provides an overview of the relevant literature on the subject of this thesis. In the third chapter, the methodology is explained that ensures a transparent research design that facilitates the repeatability of the research. The actual research study is outlined in the fourth chapter. First, a general overview of the regional security situation in Central Asia is provided. This overview has been written based on an extensive investigation into this situation, taking into account the five security dimensions under investigation. Following this, the extent to which each hypothesis can be accepted or rejected will be deduced for the three hypotheses on the basis of the general overview. In the final chapter follows a conclusion in which an answer to the research question is given on the basis of the hypotheses.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This section takes a closer look at the RSCT that serves as the theoretical basis of this thesis, where explanations of relevant terms and definitions are provided. Subsequently, the literature review provides an overview of the scientific state of the art on regional security in Central Asia. This analysis will focus on the institutions, actors and security challenges that shape the security landscape of Central Asia.

2.1. Regional Security Complex Theory

Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, both professors of International Relations, published their book *Regions and Powers the Structure of International Security* in 2003. In this work, they argue that as a result of decolonisation, the regional level of security has assumed a more autonomous and prominent role in international relations. The authors argue that this process has accelerated as a result of the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of bipolarity (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p.3). Their RSCT was developed in 1983 and has been advanced several times since then. The theory sees itself as complementing neorealism by incorporating a regional dimension to the system structure. However, because of its constructivist view on security, which will be elaborated upon subsequently, it places itself outside the neorealist project (ibid, p.11).

The core idea of the RSCT is that since most threats spread more easily over short distances than over longer ones, mutual security dependence is normally divided into regional clusters called RSCs (ibid, p.4). As a result of improving and developing their theory, in 2003 they defined an RSC as “*a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another*” (ibid, p.44). The Constructivist element of this theory is that an RSC “*is defined by durable patterns of amity and enmity taking the form of sub-global, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence*”. This implies that RSCs depend on the actions and interpretations of the actors in those regional systems and are thus more than just a mechanical reflection of the distribution of power (ibid, pp. 40-45).

It is therefore important that RSCs have a sufficient degree of security dependence to establish themselves as a group while differentiating themselves from the security regions around them. Although some scholars understand RSCs as entities that can overlap, Buzan and Waever in their theory see them as mutually exclusive (ibid, pp.47-48). In an earlier work describing the RSCT, which they co-wrote with scholar Jaap de Wilde in 1998 called: *Security: A New Framework of Analysis*. The authors sought to expand upon the traditional military-political approach to security. By incorporating three additional sectors, the economic, societal and environmental, the authors introduced a more comprehensive perspective on security within the context of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Consequently, the RSCT encompasses five multidimensional sectors, offering a broader understanding of security (Buzan et al., 1998, p. vii; Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 45).

The RSCT distinguishes between a securitising actor and a referent object. A securitising actor is one who makes claims about security and who does so in relation to a referent object (that which needs to be secured). This referent object can be something from one of the five mentioned sectors and

could, for example, in the case of the environmental sector, be the rainforest that is threatened and about which a securitising actor (e.g. the president of a country) makes a claim. Securitising is thus a performative act, of actors placing a threat on the security agenda (ibid. pp. 70-72).

When the opposite occurs and a securitising actor no longer sees a referent object as a threat and thus removes it from the agenda, we speak of desecuritisation. In this case, a security community may emerge where states have addressed and (partially) resolved previous common threats, or they have (partially) lost mutual fear of each other (ibid, pp. 57-58, pp. 73-74). A good example of an RSCT where these processes have taken place is the European Union (EU) (ibid. pp. 374-376).

Based on this RSCT, Buzan and Waever divide the world into twelve RSCs. However, there are some countries or regions that do not fall under any of these twelve RSCs. These are zones located in locations where two RSCs face each other and where this region is not powerful enough to unite both RSCs. This concept is called an insulator (region or state) and is *“not to be confused with the traditional idea of a buffer state, whose function is defined by standing at the centre of a strong pattern of securitisation, not at its edge”* (ibid, p.41). The RSCT additionally talks about subcomplexes. These regions have basically the same definition as an RSC and is anchored in a larger RSC. A subcomplex exhibits distinct patterns of security interdependence that are incorporated into a larger RSC that defines the whole (ibid, p.51).

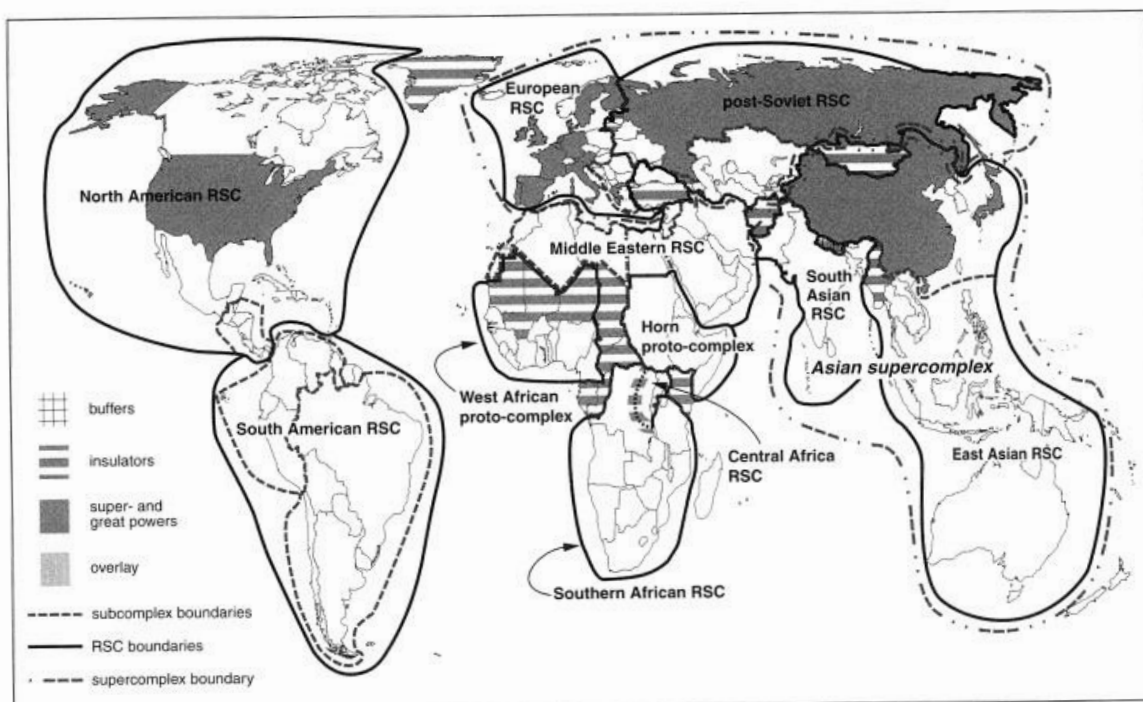


Figure 1. Division of the world according to the RSCT. Source: Regions and Powers, Buzan and Waever (2003).

2.1.1. Central Asia in the RSCT

Buzan and Waever see the Central Asian region as a weak subcomplex located in the larger Post-Soviet RSC. They argue in 2003 that the internal dynamics of this region are still developing and Russia's influence is strong (ibid, p. 423). There are many security problems in the region, most of which are transnational such as drug trafficking and regional extremism. According to the authors, patterns of amity and enmity have not yet formed in the region, other than a traditional distrust and competition over regional leadership between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. None of the CAR is trying to set up a regional alliance. One explanation for the lack of strong regional security dynamics is because of the weak military power of the states, with Uzbekistan being the exception. It is argued that the region is unstructured and open to the interference of external powers (ibid, pp. 423-426).

Turkey is seen as a potential factor of long-term importance. However, Turkish domestic economic problems and the region's unwillingness for a new big brother have still held it back. Iran is referred to by the authors in 2003 as the most pragmatic player, mainly trying to play off its shared interests with Russia in the region. Russia is seen as the biggest player in 2003 partly because of its personal relationships and networks in the region and its geographical location (ibid, pp. 426-427). Another argument is the attachment of many Central Asian countries to Russia through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) that emerged from the Collective Security Treaty (CST) signed in Tashkent on 15 May 1992 (ODKB, n.d.-c; ibid, p. 427). However, Russia has a weak element and that is its economy, as a result, experts expect a long-term retreat. Although Russia's power in the region should not be underestimated (ibid, p. 427-428).

Buzan and Waever argue in their work that China is only operating defensively in the region because it fears the consequences of the spillover effect in the neighbouring Xinjiang province. However, they do highlight China's potential future role in the economic sphere (ibid, p.428). The last potential superpower in the region is the US. The authors see the US role in Central Asia as uncertain. US interference through NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme and US support for the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which includes Turkmenistan, are seen as signals of US interference in the region (BP, n.d.; NATO, 2023; ibid, p.428). In addition, the US has been present in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan with military bases since the September 11, 2001 attacks. Although the authors question to what extent this military presence is permanent and to what extent the US might succeed in shaping the region (ibid, p.428).

In the event that all the aforementioned external powers from other RSCs were to focus extensively on the Central Asian region, it could potentially form a large insulator region together with Afghanistan, which is already an insulator state. However, this has not happened and Russia's role remains predominantly significant. Consequently, Buzan and Waever see Central Asia as a sub-complex in the Post-Soviet complex while acknowledging the possibility for the region to form its own RSC in the future (ibid, pp. 428-429).

2.2. Literature Review

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and as one of the results, the formation of five independent countries in Central Asia, regional security in this region became a popular subject of study. This literature review aims to examine the current state of academic research on this topic, highlighting key themes and discussions related to regional security in Central Asia.

A closer examination of relevant literature reveals differing perspectives among authors regarding the primary security guarantor in the Central Asian region. Broadly, the majority of scholars view Russia as the main security guarantor. Then there are also some authors who increasingly perceive Central Asia as an independent security region. Additionally, a subset of researchers considers China's role in the region to be of growing significance, while still recognizing the importance of Russia's influence. These articles tend to be more recent. Thus, the articles can be classified into three categories. In addition, a few of these publications explore the role of the United States as an actor in the region, although none identify it as the most crucial player.

Despite differing views regarding who assumes the role of the primary security actor in the region, there is a consensus among authors on the main security challenges faced by the region, which include regional terrorism, drug and human trafficking, internal conflicts over water and land resources, and cross-border environmental issues such as water scarcity (Abdolvand et al., 2014; Musiol, 2015; Aben, 2019). The literature review is divided into the three aforementioned categories, followed by a conclusion.

2.2.1. Literature on Russia as a Security Guarantor in Central Asia

In 2008, scholar Roy Allison published an article indicating that attempts at regional cooperation between the five Central Asian countries had not yet yielded any significant success. However, he argues that the enthusiasm of these countries to participate in macro-regional partnerships that include the Central Asian region, such as the CSTO, the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) remains underexplored (Allison, 2008, p.185). Allison argues that these countries are mainly interested in these organisations because it offers a form of 'protective integration'. By this, the author refers to the protection from external influences in the region that try to promote issues such as good governance and democracy in the region. According to the author, the leaders of the Central Asian countries, therefore, act in this mainly out of individual self-preservation. There is no real meaningful regionalism, according to the author, not only because of the neo-patriarchal nature of politics in these countries but also because of the weak and dysfunctional capacity of Central Asian countries to get ambitious regional projects off the ground. As a result, these countries choose to align with Russia in its regional organisations and, to a lesser extent, China in the SCO. Despite the associated costs, Central Asian leaders are willing to pay this price out of self-preservation. Additionally, the author argues that Russian involvement makes possible cooperation with China easier (ibid, pp.197-198).

Another article written in 2011 highlights that since the mid-1990s, the interests of Russia and China have increasingly converged. Something mainly manifested in their joint opposition to the US and collaboration within the SCO regarding Central Asia. In this region, according to the authors, both

regional superpowers have an advantage over the US. However, questions arise about the sustainability of this cooperation. For instance, Russia wants to focus more on military developments within the SCO, whereas China primarily envisions an economic focus with this organisation (Wilhelmsen & Flikke, 2011, p.866, 884). The authors also argue that developments in the Russian-dominated CSTO of which China is not a member have largely drawn Central Asian countries into Russia's control, resulting in increased cooperation between the mutual security services and armed forces. Consequently, the authors argue that the difference between the two powers regarding their military and economic vision of Central Asia could potentially drive the two countries apart in the future (ibid, pp.894-895).

in 2013, Anna Kreikemeyer wrote an article in which she examined the CSTO and the SCO and their impact on the role of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union (EU) in Central Asia. She argued that the CSTO was created mainly to serve Russian interests as a regional leader and serves as a vehicle to be equal to NATO. Although, according to her, this organisation has not yet been very successful in addressing regional security issues (Kreikemeyer, 2013, pp.175-176). Similarly, the SCO also struggled to address regional security problems in the Central Asian region. And although the organisation claims to be engaged in combating terrorism and drug trafficking, it has not taken any appointive policy steps here either.

The OSCE and the EU have made several attempts to get involved in regional security policy. However, Central Asian countries show resistance to structural reforms in the democratic and rule of law fields. This resistance prevents the OSCE and the EU from playing an effective role in the region (ibid, pp. 177-180). She concludes that since the authoritarian consensus in Central Asia will not change and Russia is still the guarantor of regional security, it is necessary for Western organisations like the OSCE and the EU to cooperate with Russia and, to a lesser extent, China in the region (ibid, p.181). It should be noted that this article was written in 2013. Kreikemeyer's categorisation of the OSCE as a purely Western organisation seems unusual, as she does not mention that in 2013, Russia and Central Asian countries were themselves members of this organisation (OSCE, n.d.).

What these articles have in common is that they recognise that Central Asia faces complex regional security challenges, with the authors identifying Russia as the main actor in this region. Additionally, they emphasize the roles of the CSTO and SCO which also highlights the involvement of China, although it is considered of less significance than Russia. It is worth mentioning that these articles are relatively dated, considering that the most recent one was written in 2013.

2.2.2. Literature on Central Asia as its own RSC

In 2015, Polish researcher Marek Musiol writes an article examining Central Asia through the lens of the RSCT. He analysed five security problems in the region, arguing that they all possess elements of the five multidimensional sectors from Buzan and Waever's theory (Musiol, 2015, p.61). In addition, he looks at how multiple international actors such as the EU, India and Pakistan and others, in addition to the obvious actors Russia and China, approach Central Asia as a region (ibid, p.68). He argues that Russia has failed to achieve hegemony in Central Asia partly because Central Asian countries do not accept Russian dominance and the Russian-dominated CIS and EEU still face numerous problems. The influence of other actors like China, the U.S., Iran and Saudi Arabia has allowed the CAR to pursue a 'multi-vector policy' towards all these external powers and this region

serves as the location for a 'New Great Game'. The shared history, geographical location, corresponding political and economic systems and shared security issues make Central Asia its own autonomous multi-polar RSC, according to Musiol. However, the author does not rule out the possibility that this RSC will evolve into a bipolar structure led by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, or even a unipolar structure led by Kazakhstan alone (Ibid, pp. 74-76, 78).

In the same year 2015, another article was published that considered Central Asia according to the RSCT. This article, written by scholar Evgeny Troitskiy examines the impact of Russian and U.S. policies on the creation of what he believes to be an autonomous RSC in Central Asia (Troitskiy, 2015, p.2). He argues that the attacks on September 11, 2001, and as a result the choice of Central Asian countries to grant basing rights to the U.S., (despite Russian opposition), provides evidence that Central Asia formed its own RSC. After all, they made a regional security decision without listening to Russia, something that, according to the author, detached them as a subcomplex from the Post-Soviet complex. Furthermore, the CAR chose to distance themselves from Russia when it came to recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia, for example.

Troitskiy views this Central Asian complex as bipolar with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the key actors (ibid, pp. 6, 14, 18). The fact that the five Central Asian countries allowed an American military presence after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and that they themselves sometimes dare to deviate from Russia's view, indicates a multi-vector policy. However, the conclusion that Central Asia will therefore form its own RSC is taken rather easily. While these actions represent signals within the military and political sectors, the author overlooks three other multidimensional sectors as described in the RSCT.

In 2020, a short article published by scholar Akram Umarov argued that Central Asia had broken free from the Post-Soviet complex and started to form its own RSC. The author supports this claim by stating that several external actors are now active in this region, whereas Russia used to be the primary external influence. He also shows that all five Central Asian countries emphasize the importance of their Central Asian neighbours in their 'Foreign Policy Concepts'. Another argument the author cites is the threat posed by Afghanistan. He states that the countries in Central Asia perceive this as the greatest regional danger and fear potential spillover effects.

According to scholar Akram Umarov, this conflict has increased the need to form its own RSC (Umarov, 2020, pp. 2-4). The conclusion does point out that the future of this autonomous RSC is unclear as several major powers, including China with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are interfering in the region (ibid, p.5). It also applies to this article that the position that Central Asia forms its own RSC is rather easily taken. For example, the article does not mention the five multidimensional sectors from the RSCT. Additionally, Umarov discusses the need that Central Asian countries feel to form an RSC due to the perceived threat from Afghanistan. However, this presupposes that the leaders of Central Asia have knowledge of the RSCT and the formation of RSCs. However, in practice, these are mainly developments that are considered by researchers from a theoretical point of view and not something that the actors themselves are actively engaged in.

In a recent piece published in 2023 by the Central Asian Analytical Network, Kazakh political scientist Askar Nursha discusses the implications of the changing international order for Central Asia. He highlights that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a divergence among post-Soviet countries, accelerating the disintegration of the post-Soviet space. The narrative is shifting towards a Central Asian identity rather than a Soviet one. Nursha emphasizes the importance of diversifying partnerships beyond the energy sector, advocating for cooperation with China and the US. Overcoming territorial disputes and trade barriers is seen as essential for fostering a shared Central

Asian future. Nursha proposes strengthening regional identity and establishing a regional market, while emphasizing the need for future political institutionalization.

All four articles agree that Russia's role is diminishing and three of the four articles mention that Central Asia is forming its own RSC. However, as mentioned earlier, this conclusion is taken rather simply without considering the five multidimensional sectors of the RSCT, giving the impression that the conclusions are based on relatively narrow evidence. Additionally, it is noteworthy that these articles are of a slightly more recent date than the articles that regarded Russia as the most important security guarantor in Central Asia.

2.2.3. Literature on the Growing Chinese Significance in Central Asia

In 2017, an article was published highlighting how China became one of the main actors in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union, which tried to take advantage of the new situation that emerged. The author, Mahesh Debata, explained how after 1991 the resulting power vacuum in Central Asia, led to an increase in radical Islamism and terrorism. China feared this would have spillover effects on their Xinjiang province which borders three CAR. Although Russia and China are formally trying to cooperate in the region, according to the author, their interests are nevertheless divergent (Debata, 2015, pp. 55-56).

Debata describes how instability in Central Asia and Xinjiang seem to influence each other leading China to see this region as of great importance. As a result, China is trying to make the SCO the main body when it comes to regional security issues in this region and in addition, China tries to maintain good bilateral relations with the five republics. It has demilitarised the border area between Xinjiang and the three neighbouring Central Asian countries, and increased military cooperation with, for example, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (ibid, pp. 60-61). The author concludes that the region faces growing security problems that China is eager to contain. Meanwhile, he says, that the CAR have confidence in China as a partner. Thus, both sides need each other to establish peace and stability in the region (ibid, pp. 63-64). What stands out in this article compared to the other articles examined is the author's primary focus on China as the most important regional security actor in the region.

An article written in 2021 by Sebastian Mayer examines the degree of regional cooperation in Central Asia and argues that the region's self-organisation is limited. He thus argues that there is no real self-regionalism yet but that regional security issues are primarily solved by external partners such as Russia and China (Mayer, 2021, pp.204-205). Mayer argues that regional cooperation in Central Asia is mainly hindered because of a lack of power resources to deter their two big neighbours (ibid, p.210).

However, the five countries in Central Asia attempt to cooperate with various external actors such as with Russia through the CSTO and with China (and Russia), through the SCO. The 9/11 attacks also enabled cooperation with other countries like the US, Turkey and Iran. Something that counterbalanced the dominance of Russia and China for a while although both countries remained dominant even at that time. The author argues how since 2014 Russia has paid less attention to Central Asia partly due to its involvement in Crimea, eastern Ukraine and Syria. This while at the same time China has increased as a power factor, although mainly in the economic sector.

The author concludes that China is Russia's only challenger of interest in the region and is increasingly trying to enter into bilateral agreements with the CAR, in addition to the multilateral agreements

within the SCO (ibid, p.220-223). Although this article still identifies Russia as an important actor, it can be inferred that China is of increasing importance.

In 2021, Janko Šćepanović wrote an article in which examines Russia's intentions in the SCO. He argues that Russia is pursuing a strategy of hegemonic cooperation in other regional organisations such as the CSTO and EEC and wants to examine to what extent this is also Russia's plan in the SCO (Šćepanović, 2021, pp.712-713). He describes how Russia benefits from the SCO by creating regional trust with China and re-establishing Russia back on the world stage. Something that was necessary after the fall of the Soviet Union and Russia's first encounter with a more powerful and wealthier China. It also created a bloc for both countries against the West (ibid, p.719).

However, according to the author, Russian expectations of the SCO are not that high. For instance, Russia has never expressed support for economic cooperation in the SCO and is dissatisfied with the lack of support from other SCO members for the intervention in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea. Additionally, Russia fears that the SCO will eventually end Russian power in the region (ibid, p.723).

Šćepanović concludes that Russia is uncertain about its role in the SCO because China is experiencing a tremendous, rise while Russia has declined. Russia had no choice but to participate in the SCO although it was not happy with China's increasing influence in the region. Nonetheless, it also provides Russia with many advantages. However, according to the author, it is a fact that since the establishment of the SCO, the differences between China and Russia have only increased, and although China is very important to Russia as a partner, conversely, Russia is becoming less and less important to China (ibid, pp. 727-728). What is striking about these articles highlighting China's growing role is that they were all published relatively recently.

2.2.4. Bridging the Literature and Thesis Contribution

As a result of the literature review, several observations stand out. First, there appears to be a change over time regarding different authors' perspectives on who the primary regional security guarantor in Central Asia is. Earlier articles all emphasize the dominant role of Russia, while more recent works, seem to take on an increasingly important role for China. Additionally, some articles propose that Central Asia constitutes its own RSC. However, these articles tend to have limited reasoning and do not consider all five multidimensional sectors of the RSCT in their research. This thesis aims to combine the three perspectives and, through the proposed hypotheses, find an answer to the main question, *"To Which RSC does Central Asia belong in 2023?"* In doing so, this thesis will take into account all five multidimensional sectors.

3. Methodological Section

This section outlines the methodology employed in this thesis. This is designed in order to answer the three proposed hypotheses and the central research question. First the deductive approach of this research will be discussed. Then, the five multidimensional sectors used in this thesis are discussed, with a selection of elements within these sectors being chosen. To indicate the relative importance per sector a weightage will be assigned. The data selection and the hypotheses will also be briefly discussed.

3.1. Deductive Approach

As previously mentioned, this research is deductive. In practice, this means that the empirical chapter first provided a general overview of the security situation in Central Asia since 2003. Subsequently, the extent to which evidence was found for each hypothesis based on this general security overview was deduced. In this methodology, the next subchapter discusses the five multidimensional sectors and which elements belong to them. Given the deductive nature of this research, the extent to which these elements can be traced back per hypothesis as threats, or resolutions of threats (processes of securitisation and desecuritisation as described in the theoretical section), has therefore been examined retrospectively. In practice, this might mean that some elements attributed to a sector are subsequently not reflected in the security overview since 2003 if it turns out that no nameable securitisation/de-securitisation took place on this basis. In developing the methodology of this thesis the scope and depth are influenced by the word limits of this research. Given the complex topic of Regional security in Central Asia, the broad timespan of 20 years and the decision to examine this through the lens of five multidimensional sectors. It is important to understand that this has implications for the depth of the investigation into each sector and element. This limitation is an inherent part of this thesis and should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results.

3.2. The Multidimensional Sectors and Elements

This list below provides the multi-dimensional sectors under consideration in this study. Each sector is discussed in more detail in this section.

- 1: Military Sector
- 2: Political Sector
- 3: Economic Sector
- 4: Societal Sector
- 5: Environmental Sector

The military sector mainly encompasses the ability of governments to be able to protect themselves from internal and external military threats. It also extends to non-military threats such as refugees and rival ideologies. Military threats can be either internal or external. Internal military threats are mainly about militant separatism, terrorism, and criminal organisations. External military threat refers to a country's concern over external actors threatening its country. This could involve the threat of

total destruction or threats to individual subjects (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 49-51). In the context of this study, the following aspects are considered part of the military sector: regional security concerns regarding terrorism (internal military threat), military conflicts and alliances in the region, the presence of external military bases, mutual arms trade and military exercises. Given the research question and hypotheses of this study, the focus is specifically on the five Central Asian countries, Russia and China. This means that it does not look at, for example, mutual arms trade between the five republics and other external actors.

The political sector presents a paradox, after all, all forms of security contain a political element. Thus, one can speak of political-economic security issues but this also applies to the other sectors. However, since we already have these categories, the political sector simultaneously serves as a residual category. Political security primarily concerns threats directed against the legitimacy of a state, but in this case not military threats such as terrorism since this element is assigned to the military sector (ibid, pp. 141-143). In this thesis, the following elements are attributed to the political sector. First the role of international organisations. In addition, cross-border drug trafficking is included. As revealed by research into the literature on Central Asia and own research into the region, this is an important issue. Since this is not necessarily a military threat but can undermine a country's legitimacy, it has been chosen to assign it to the political sector. The analysis also considers meetings between the countries under consideration. The element of international organizations might have some overlap with the military sector, where joint alliances are examined, but this is necessary as many organisations fulfil both a military and a political role.

The economic sector is particularly concerned with the pursuit of states economic stability. Threats to this economic stability can have significant consequences for states, potentially causing spillover effects in other sectors. For instance, a state under economic stress might find it challenging to make investments in the military sector, thereby creating potential military security problems. The same applies to the other sectors. Although there are several schools of economic thought that all interpret economic security problems differently, these have not been explored further in this study.

In this thesis, the following elements are included in the economic sector. First, this sector looks at the international economic organisations of interest. In addition, the degree of economic (in)dependence is assessed, after all this says a lot about the extent to which Central Asia as a region is dependent on its large neighbours or on the contrary, has the potential to be independent of those neighbours and to be able to manage economically as a region on its own. It has been chosen in the economic dimension to divide the review into three sections. First it looks at CAR's economic interconnectedness with Russia, then with China, and finally it looks at economic integration between the five countries in Central Asia.

The societal sector involves the degree to which individuals feel that they belong to a particular group, it involves a potential shared identity and self-identification with the community. In terms of regional security, this sector concerns that which could threaten the survival of a society, or in the case of desecuritisation, that which connects and strengthens a society. Mutual migration flows are important in this context, as they can change the ethnic composition of a country, with culture and language playing a major role in creating a society (ibid, pp. 119-121). For the purpose of this thesis, the following elements were considered: ethnic conflicts, potential security issues as a result of adjustments in language and culture and changes in migration.

The environmental sector is relatively the newest security sector. It gained prominence after the UN conference on the 'human environment' in 1972, marking the beginning of international engagement

for this topic. Security issues in this sector are mainly related to resource scarcity, sustainability and disruptions to the ecosystem (ibid, pp.72, 74-75). In this thesis, I chose to also focus on resource scarcity with a particular focus on water scarcity issues in the region. Furthermore, potential problems concerning energy and threats to the ecosystem in the region have been considered. In this sector, international organizations have also been examined.

3.3. Distribution of Sectoral Weightage

In this thesis, the five multidimensional sectors each have their own weighting factor, reflecting the relative weight of influence on Central Asia's regional security. These weights were determined using information from the reviewed literature on the subject and additionally based on own research.

Based on this information, the following distribution was adopted.

- Military sector: 30%
- Political sector: 30%
- Economic sector: 20%
- Societal sector: 10%
- Environmental sector: 10%

The higher percentages in the first two sectors are based on the fact that both sectors are still the most prevalent in discussions on security, and besides, they are the two traditional security sectors. The economic sector, although not as dominant as the first two sectors, is given significant weight because of its importance for other sectors, as told in the description of the sectors. The last two sectors have relatively the smallest weights, this is because these sectors are relatively new and therefore less discussed.

The main purpose of this weighting is to consider the degree of support for each hypothesis taking into account the complex multidimensional nature of regional security.

3.4. Sources of Data

This study relies on a wide range of primary sources supplemented by secondary sources. This in order to provide a comprehensive regional security overview of Central Asia for the period 2003-2023. The primary sources in this study consist of key policy documents and joint statements of international organisations such as the SCO, the CSTO and Central Asia Summits. These documents were examined because they provide insight into the security perception of the states examined in this thesis. In addition, several databases were utilised, including information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) for data on mutual arms trade between the CAR and their two main neighbours Russia and China. To examine trade flows between these actors, the United Nations Comtrade database was used.

Secondary sources in this study encompass peer-reviewed academic articles and information from reports by think tanks and research institutes. The selection of sources in this study was guided based on their relevance to answering the research question and their reliability. The aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of developments in the security situation of Central Asia during the research period. However, it should be noted that not every source has been specifically cited in the general overview due to the study's breadth. A reference list is provided at the end of this study where all sources that were referenced are listed. In addition, there is a list called 'List of Government Agreements and Documents', which includes the sources that were investigated for the general security review. If a source was both consulted and referenced, it appears in both lists.

4. Empirical section

This section covers the actual research. Initially, it provides a general overview of regional security in Central Asia for the period between 2003 and 2023, this is done for each sector individually. Subsequently, the extent to which this general overview provides evidence for the individual hypotheses is examined deductively for each hypothesis.

4.1. General Overview of Regional Security: Military Sector

4.1.1. International Organizations

In order to understand the developments in Central Asia's military-regional security, it is necessary to consider two International organisations that were established shortly before the research period of this thesis, the SCO (2001) and the CSTO (2002) (UN, n.d.; ODKB, n.d-c).

The CSTO a Russian-led political-military organisation of which both Russia and some CAR are members. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been members since its inception, while Uzbekistan was a member from 2006-2012. Turkmenistan has never been a member because of its neutrality (Turkmenistan, n.d.). The organisation builds on the CST and states in Article 4 that an attack on a member state is considered an attack on all member states (ODKB, n.d.-a). As part of the CSTO, the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) was established in 2009, whose role is to intervene quickly in case of security threats in CSTO member states (ODKB, n.d.-b). Military exercises regularly take place within the CSTO on the territory of member states and also target anti-terrorist elements (ODKB, n.d-d; Rozanov & Douhan, 2014, pp. 70-71).

However, the role of the CSTO in regional conflicts has been selective. For instance, in June 2010, ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks took place in southern Kyrgyzstan, resulting in 350 deaths and displacing more than 100,000, however, the CSTO did not intervene (Sestanovich, 2010; McGlinchey, 2011, p.80). However, in January 2022, the CSTO security council agreed for the first time to send troops to a member state, in this case Kazakhstan, to suppress political unrest. This decision was supported by the Central Asian member states of the CSTO, who emphasized the risk to the whole region. Tajik President Rakhmon for instance, spoke of 'sleepers cells' threatening the CSTO security zone (ODKB, 2022; PJT, 2022).

A second important regional organisation is the SCO, established in 2001 by China, Russia and four of the five CAR; only Turkmenistan is again not a member because of its neutrality. The founding members, with the exception of Uzbekistan, were all members of the Shanghai Five which, as a precursor, was established in 1996 and was created, among other things, to build military trust

between member states in the shared border areas. Since its establishment, India and Pakistan and Iran have become part of the SCO (ICSCO, n.d.). China is the dominant and influential power within this organization. Since its establishment in 2001, China has effectively advanced its own agenda within the organization (European Parliament, 2015).

The purpose of the SCO is regional security and stability and it is a military, political and economic alliance. Whereas in this dimension, only the military aspect of the organisation is discussed (Alimov, 2018, pp.114-115). Military exercises are held regularly in SCO context, the 1st multilateral of which was held in 2003 and included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in addition to China and Russia. These annual military exercises have consistently included Russia and China, with the majority of years also seeing the participation of the CAR member states of the SCO. What is striking is that the organisation labels many of these exercises as 'anti-terrorist' exercises (SCIOPRC, 2018).

An analysis of 17 available joint statements by SCO heads of state since 2003 reflects the focus on anti-terrorism. It can be read that in 2003, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was established partly as a result of the recognition of the transnational nature of terrorism (ShOS, 2003). The fight against regional terrorism is a recurring theme in each statement, recognizing the potential fear for spillover effects because of the unstable situation in Afghanistan. From 2005 onwards, every document mentions separatism and extremism in addition to terrorism. This could possibly be a reaction by the SCO to the colour revolutions that took place in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) (Kalandadze & Orenstein, 2009). Since 2007, a recurrent theme has been the decision to make Central Asia a nuclear weapons-free zone. In summary, the primary common security threats are seen as terrorism (mainly spillover effects from Afghanistan), separatism and extremism.

Since 2018, the heads of the CAR have held a summit that has now been held four times, further details about this will be explored in the overview of the political dimension. Examination of the four joint statements after the summits reveals that, the only military-related point expressed by the five countries encourages the nuclear-free zone in Central Asia.

4.1.2. Military Presence

In the context of this study, the military presence of Russia and China in CAR was examined. Russia maintains a military presence in the three Central Asian countries that are members of the CSTO. Virtually all of the military bases where Russia now has a presence in these countries date from Soviet times and are currently leased by Russia. For instance, Russia has an anti-ballistic test ground in Sary Shagan, Kazakhstan and additionally, it leases Baikonur until 2050 using this facility for both space and military launches (President of Russia, 2004, 2007; ESA, 2005; Voennoe obozrenie, 2021).

In Kyrgyzstan, Russia is present at Kant airbase, has a weapons test site near Karakol and has a seismological station. There is also an anti-submarine weapon test site at Lake Issyk-Kul. Russia is also present in Tajikistan with a military base and smaller military departments. This concerns the 201 military base located just outside the capital Dushanbe. Furthermore, there is a space surveillance station in Nurek called Okno. This station is responsible for satellite tracking. (Gfsis, n.d.) During Uzbekistan's membership of CSTO, Russia had a military presence at the Karshi-Khanabad airbase, an airport that, with Russia's approval, was also used by the U.S. for several years for missions in Afghanistan (Warsaw Institute, 2021).

Contrastingly, China has no military bases in CAR. Although as of 2021 it has admitted building an outpost in south-eastern Tajikistan, however, this post would not be manned by military personnel from the Chinese military (ISPI, 2022).

4.1.3. Arms Trade

The SIPRI database was utilized to trace the arms trade between Central Asian countries with Russia and China. The period from 2003 to 2022 is considered because this database does not yet provide data for 2023. In the chart below you can see the total arms trade in Trend Indicator Value (TIV). This TIV value is based on military capability and not on the financial value of military goods. (For a more detailed explanation, see the SIPRI website for a thorough explanation of their methodology (Holtom et al., 2012)).

The chart below indicates that Russia is a larger arms supplier than China during the study period. However, a closer examination of individual years uncovers something interesting in the more recent years. For example, China supplied a total of 234 million (in TIV) to Turkmenistan from 2016-2022, while Russia supplied only 38 million during the same period. It is also notable that in more recent years China is starting to become a larger supplier to Uzbekistan, although Russia still supplies more (SIPRI, 2023). The arms trade between CAR is not included in this consideration due to its insignificance.

Country	Russia (in TIV expressed in millions)	China (in TIV expressed in millions)
Kazakhstan	2083	34
Tajikistan	87	4
Kyrgyzstan	51	1
Uzbekistan	186	122
Turkmenistan	366	234
Total for CA	2743	395

Figure 2. Arms trade in TIV. Source: SIPRI (2023).

Figure 3 on the following page displays a line chart illustrating the total arms trade in TIV for both Russia and China with respect to Central Asia as a whole. Due to the absence of available TIV data for China in certain years when no arms were supplied to the CAR, the line representing China's arms trade occasionally registers as 0.

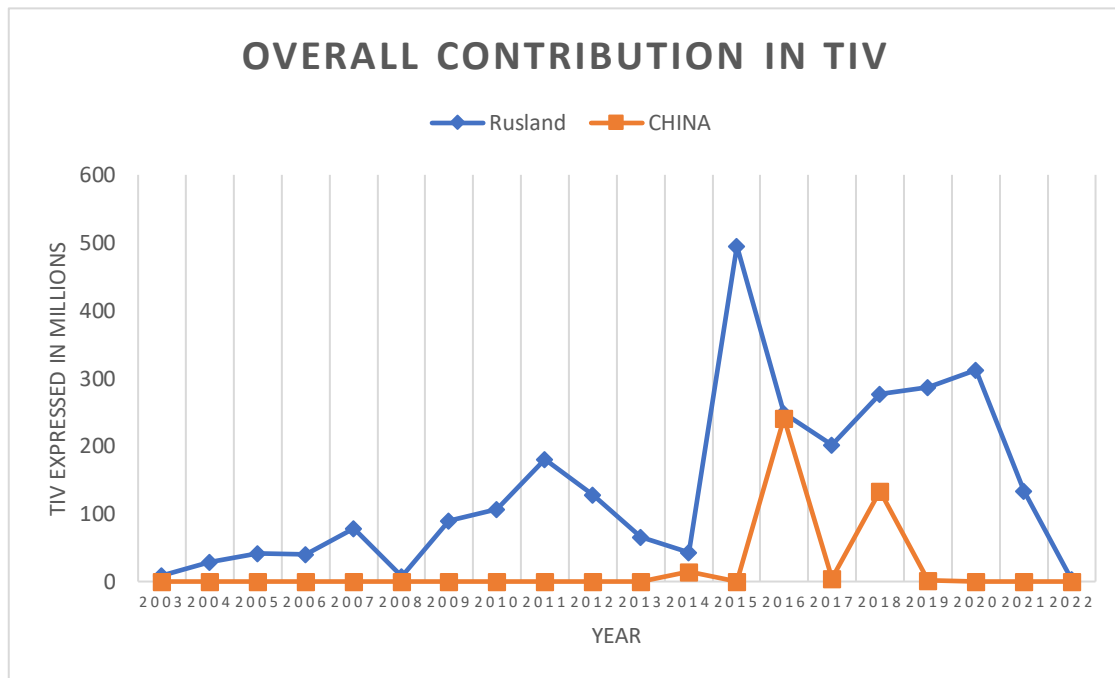


Figure 3: Overall Contribution of Arms trade in TIV from Russia and China to the CAR in total.

4.2. General Overview of Regional Security: Political Sector

4.2.1. International Organizations

An important international organisation in the political sector is the CIS. This organisation was established in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union with all five CAR states becoming members in addition to Russia and some other former Soviet states (SNG, 1991). Despite being a signatory to the CIS charter and therefore a founding state, Turkmenistan never ratified this charter, thereby relegating it to associate member status rather than full membership (MIDT, 2022-b).

Examination of policy documents of the CIS reveals that the organisation is primarily concerned with fostering political and economic cooperation. Military cooperation, although present, is less emphasized and given the word length on this thesis and the greater military importance of the CSTO and SCO in the military sector, it has not been addressed in that sector. Regarding the political sector, the CIS focuses mainly on maintaining peace and providing a platform for dialogue. Member states emphasise the importance of respecting each other's sovereignty and borders and call for peaceful resolutions in the case of disputes. Members also commit to tackle numerous political issues ranging from cross-border drug trafficking to cooperating on public utilities (SNG, 2008; 2014).

In addition to the previously discussed military component, the SCO also contains a political component. Closer examination of all the joint statements issued by the SCO heads of state reveals a picture of ever-evolving and integrating political cooperation. An annually recurring theme in the joint declarations concerning security, is the issue of cross-border drug problems, with the Afghan border identified as an important region with regard to this problem.

Growing political collaboration can be seen in the growing number of meetings between officials. For instance, in 2004, there is a proposal by Uzbekistan to hold an annual meeting between the presidents of all security councils, something that received approved by all member states (ShOS,

2004). It is also notable that over the years, there has been increasing talk of friendship between the countries, culminating in the signing of a Treaty on Long-term Good-neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation in 2007 (CORIL, 2007). Since then, it is emphasised annually that the SCO members interact as friends in good harmony.

It is also notable that member states frequently call for diplomatic resolution of disputes, such as in 2010 after the ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan. In 2017, the organisation expanded its membership in 2017 to include Pakistan and India (ShOS, 2010; 2017). The ever-improving political cooperation among the CAR is seen as a success by the SCO, encouraging consultative meetings among the five CAR. In 2022, Central Asia is even referred to as the core of the SCO (ShOS, 2019; 2022).

4.2.2. Consultative Meetings CAR

On March 15, 2018, a consultative meeting between the five CAR was held for the first time, agreeing to hold such a meeting annually from now on. Although such a meeting was held impossible for years, the death of Uzbek President Karimov in 2016 initiated a shift towards more cooperation in the region. His successor, President Mirziyoyev adopted a liberal stance and was more open to contact with neighbouring countries (Georgi, 2018).

Interestingly, there are hardly any official documents or announcements of this first meeting. The subsequent three meetings consistently advocate for improved multilateral political cooperation among the five countries. It is also emphasized that these meetings are always held on the basis of friendship and mutual trust.

What is also striking here is the increasing willingness for political cooperation, extending beyond interactions at the head of state level, to cooperation at multiple diplomatic levels. Cooperation with other neighbouring countries is also named as a common goal, although no specific countries were mentioned.

A declaration of friendship between the countries was proposed, with only Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan signing this declaration. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan indicated they would sign it later when they had completed their domestic procedures (UN, 2019; MIDT, 2021; IKSNG, 2022). Something that analysts see as a setback for regional cooperation. This is because the excuse that domestic procedures must be completed first is seen as a fallacy. After all, the presidents of both countries have such power that they do not depend on their parliaments to make such decisions (Najibullah & Asankoyeva, 2022).

4.2.3. Central Asian Summits with their Two Major Neighbours

Last year also saw the first separate summits between Central Asian countries with Russia and Central Asian countries with China. On October 14, 2022, the inaugural Russia-Central Asia summit was held in Astana. The meeting was held to celebrate the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Russia and the CAR. This new platform should give even more opportunities for interaction between members according to Russia (President of Russia, 2022). The CAR warmly received Russia's invitation to this summit. Statements on the government websites of some CAR mention that a joint statement

was held after this summit, however, it was not published on any of the government websites. It is notable, however, that many Central Asian countries and Russia consider the situation in Afghanistan to be a regional security threat that requires special attention (PRK, 2022; MIDT, 2022-a).

During the inaugural summit between Russia and Central Asia, a noteworthy incident occurred. Tajikistan's President Rahmon expressed his discontent towards Putin, claiming that Russia's attitude had remained unchanged since the Soviet era. In his impassioned seven-minute diatribe, President Rakhmon emphasized the need for respect. Putin, visibly uncomfortable, listened to the speech. Consequently, this meeting was not perceived as a resounding success for Russia (Auyezov, 2022).

On May 19, 2023, the first China-Central Asia summit took place in China's Xinjiang province bordering Central Asia. The parties committed to intensifying their political cooperation in the future, striving to cultivate mutual benefits and maintaining a peaceful conflict-free zone. China further proposed establishing meetings and dialogue mechanisms in multiple fields such as industry, education, agriculture and between political parties (MFA China, 2023).

The summit concluded with the signing of the Xinjiang Declaration. This included an agreement that the summit will be held every two years. Furthermore, there will also be a ministerial-level meeting in the future. It was emphasized that the countries will work to ensure political stability and they will oppose, among other things, colour revolutions (Sian'skoj deklaracii, 2023).

4.3. General Overview of Regional Security: Economic Sector

4.3.1. Economic Integration: Russia and Central Asia.

The CAR have now been independent for just over 30 years. Prior to this, they were part of the Soviet Union and its economies were deeply intertwined. Central Asia is rich in resources, Kazakhstan has the richest reserves of coal and oil, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan hold substantial for hydro energy production. There are also large gas reserves in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Isiksal, 2023, p.2). Despite the challenging economic beginning for the CAR, some countries particularly Kazakhstan (from 1999-2014) and Turkmenistan (from 2006-2014) benefited from the 'Resource boom', resulting in increasing economic disparities among the CAR (Pomfret, 2021, p.538-541).

Despite early attempts at Central Asian regional integration such as the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO), Russian interference brought this to an early end (Tolipov, 2018). Further economic integration with Russia took place through the CIS and through the EEU, which, from 2014, evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (EurAsEC, n.d.).

In 2011, the CIS Free Trade Area agreement was signed in which all CAR member states excluding Turkmenistan participated along with Russia and some other former Soviet states (MFA Belarus, n.d.). By 2014, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Belarus and Armenia establish the EAEU creating the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour (EJeS, 2014).

An essential economic important factor connecting Central Asia and Russia in the economic sector, concerns migrant workers. Significant numbers of workers from mainly poorer Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and also from Uzbekistan travel to Russia for work. In some cases, the remittances that the workers send back home are so high that it amounts to 1/3rd of the country's total GDP. In Tajikistan,

remittances have, in certain years, accounted for over 40% of the national GDP, as shown below in the World Bank table.

It is noteworthy that Uzbekistan, with its more diversified economy and larger population, exhibits lower remittances as a percentage of its GDP compared to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, in terms of absolute numbers, Uzbekistan contributes the majority of Central Asian migrant workers to Russia (Russia in Global Affairs, 2016).

World Bank figures provide data up to 2021, so newer figures will have to clarify what effect the Russian invasion of Ukraine will have on remittances. However, experts on labour migration in Central Asia expect that the sanctions will have a major impact on the Russian economy and thus on migrant labour jobs. However, the most recent data indicates that the number of labor migrants has continued to increase since 2023 compared to the previous year. Despite expectations that the war in Ukraine would have a significant impact on the number of labor migrants and remittances, it has not proven to be the case. Despite an initial depreciation of the ruble at the onset of the war, the currency has stabilized, and Russia continues to rely on labor from Central Asia, perhaps even more so due to the ongoing conflict (The Diplomat, 2023).

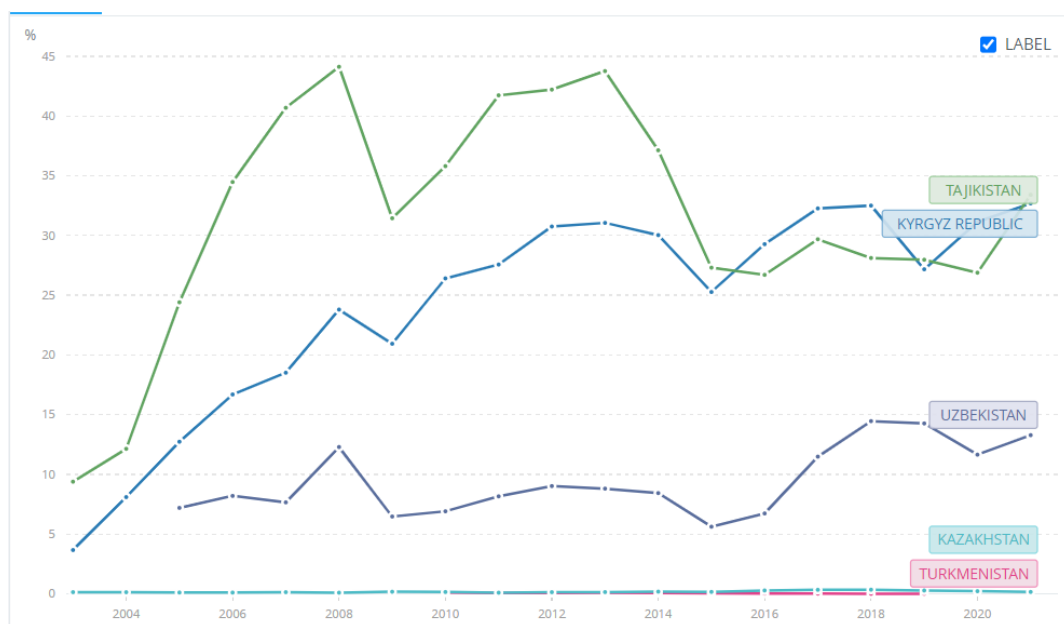


Figure 4. Personal remittances, received (% of GDP). Source: The World Bank (2023).

4.3.2. Economic Integration: China and Central Asia.

Due to the fact that CAR's economies were so intertwined with Russia right after the fall of the Soviet Union, China's economic engagement in Central Asia was limited during the 1990s (Niquet, 2006, p.5). However, with China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and the establishment of the SCO, Chinese trade relations and economic influence began to increase (ICSCO, n.d.; WTO, n.d.).

In 2004, China and Kazakhstan signed an oil and gas cooperation treaty from which the joint 'Kazakhstan-China Pipeline' was subsequently agreed as a project. This project consists of two pipelines supplying China with western Kazakh oil (KCP, n.d.). It marks the first pipeline from Central Asia to China. Further expansion was seen in 2006 with the initiation of another pipeline project, this time for gas, from Turkmenistan to China called the 'Central Asia-China pipeline'. This project consists of four pipelines with the other CAR benefiting economically as transit countries besides Turkmenistan and China (Chinagov, 2014; 2023). For treaties related to this project, see the list of government agreements and documents.

In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. During this speech, he emphasised good relations with CAR and proposed a project to serve as a modern version of the Silk Road, this speech is retrospectively seen as the kick-off of China's BRI (CG China-Toronto, 2013). This project features both land and a maritime route, with the land route intended to connect China to Europe via Central Asia (Chinagov, 2015).

All CAR benefits from this project through major infrastructure projects, among others. For instance, In Kazakhstan, on the border with China, the largest dry port in Central Asia that will soon become the largest in its kind globally (Arranz, n.d.; Khorgosgateway, n.d.). In Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, China is also running more than 40 different investment projects per country. Kazakhstan has the highest number with 102 projects and Turkmenistan the lowest with 26 as of 2019 (CADGAT, 2019).

However, the extent to which these projects actually fall under the BRI remains a question. Many observers consider the BRI to be a loosely defined concept, and the term itself is becoming less prevalent in the speeches of Chinese policymakers. Nonetheless, the proliferation of infrastructure projects in Central Asia demonstrates China's significant economic progress in the region (Gabuev, 2017; The Diplomat, 2022).

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Central Asian countries and China have been seeking alternatives to transport goods without traversing Russia's sanctioned territory. During a 2022 SCO summit held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and China signed an agreement for a joint railway line in order to diversify their foreign trade routes (MTK Kyrgyzskoj Respubliki, 2022 ;MT Respubliki Uzbekistan, 2022). This project was also reiterated at this year's first China-Central Asia summit (MT Kyrgyzskoj Respubliki, 2023).

4.3.3. Economic Integration within Central Asia.

In the years leading up to 2003, several attempts were made for economic regional integration in Central Asia without direct intervention of larger neighbouring powers. One significant example was the CACO of which all five CAR were members. Despite ambitious goals, Russian Eurasian integration projects brought these attempts in Central Asia to an end. Russia's accession to the CACO in 2004 effectively marked a transition to the Russian-dominated EurAsEC (precursor to the EAEU). As Uzbekistan opted out and Tajikistan could not meet the conditions of EurAsEC, this resulted in an end of the CACO, and a customs union in the form of the EurAsEC/EAEU drawing a border across Central Asia (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2020).

Nevertheless, since 2003, bilateral economic agreements between the CAR have been a recurring theme in the region. Some examples include the various economic contracts concluded between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in 2009, including the establishment of an intergovernmental economic cooperation organisation (MIA, 2009). Similarly, in 2017, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan entered into agreements on cooperation in the field of interests (SKU, 2017).

Furthermore, since 2018, in the form of consultative meetings between CAR, there is again a regional platform for economic discussions. During the inaugural meeting, Kazakh President Nazarbayev still praised economic cooperation with Russia and China (Georgi, 2018). However, in the three following meetings, the CAR emphasised their collective economic potential, including the potential strategic advance of serving as a transit area for goods (UN, 2019; MIDT, 2021; IKSNG, 2022).

4.4. General Overview of Regional Security: Societal Sector.

4.4.1. Ethnic tensions and Clashes.

Since their independence in 1991, CAR have contended with ethnic tensions. The Fergana Valley is the epicentre of these ethnic tensions. While examining the map of Central Asia, and the Fergana Valley in particular, one immediately notices how the borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are intertwined here, with various exclaves resulting from the illogical drawing of borders in the Soviet Union. This fertile region is home to 30% of the population of these three countries, making it the most densely populated area in Central Asia (CAAN, n.d.)

The most significant Ethnic conflict occurred in 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan, where tensions between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks culminated in large-scale violence between the two resulting in numerous casualties and displacements, primarily among Uzbeks. The country, which was already facing political tension due to the ouster of President Bakiyev earlier that year, requested the CSTO to send peacekeeping troops, which was, however, refused (ODKB, 2010; Kamp, 2017).

In Kazakhstan ethnic tensions primarily exist in the north of the country which hosts a large Russian minority. After the annexation of Crimea, Putin indicated that *"Kazakhstan had no statehood"*, which caused frustration and dissatisfaction in Kazakhstan (Dolgov, 2023).

In addition, some countries in Central Asia face autonomous regions with tensions and protests. This is particularly true of the Karakalpakstan region in Uzbekistan and the Gorno-Badakhshan region in Tajikistan, where protests frequently escalate into violence, sometimes resulting in casualties (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Rvs, 2022).

4.4.2 Uyghurs and Central Asia.

The Uyghur, an ethnic predominantly Muslim minority is an issue that is the focus of societal security discourse within Central Asia and China. The majority of the Uyghur population lives in China's Xinjiang province, but significant minorities are also present in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Minority Rights Group, 2021; Stat.kg, n.d.). China's approach towards the Uyghurs, including mass surveillance and re-education camps, draws international criticism from many governments and organisations.

Human Rights Watch even speaks of crimes against humanity and has evidence of arbitrary mass detention, torture, and rape of Uyghurs in China. (NOS, 2021; Amnesty International, 2023).

Research into CAR policy documents reveal limited commentary regarding their position on the Uyghurs. Notably, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (three countries without significant Uyghur minorities) did sign a letter to the UN in 2019 expressing support for tackling Chinese extremism in Xinjiang (UN Digital Library, 2019). Additionally, Kazakh President Tokayev indicated that the human rights situation in Xinjiang was exaggerated (Nemcova, 2019).

However among the citizens of the region, mainly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Chinese policy did lead to resistance and protest. In 2009, protests were held by Uyghur's in both countries because of the situation in China (Golovnina, 2009; Rfe/RI, 2009). Recently, the visit of a Chinese minister to Kazakhstan resulted in protests (Toiken, 2022). In some cases, instances of violence resistance have also took place, such as in 2016 when a suicide attack took place at the Chinese embassy in Bishkek (RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, 2017).

4.4.3. Cultural and linguistic influence in Central Asia.

Both Russia and China are actively promoting their languages and cultures globally through various institutions, including those in Central Asia. Russia pursues this goal through the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which was established in 2007 with a focus on promoting the Russian language, culture, and heritage. Across Central Asia, there are a total of 15 Russkiy Mir institutions, with four each in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and three in Kazakhstan. However, there is currently no Russkiy Mir institution in Turkmenistan (Russian Centers, n.d.).

On the other hand, The Chinese Confucius Institute was established in 2004 and a year later the first institute in Central Asia was opened in Tashkent. Presently, there are now 13 Confucius Institutes in Central Asia. Five in Kazakhstan, four in Kyrgyzstan and two in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Similar to the Russkiy Mir institutions, there is no Confucius institute in Turkmenistan (ICACO, 2019; Dig Mandarin, 2023; IEEIP, n.d.).

Opposition to this linguistic and cultural influence primarily targets Russia. In 2007, the president of Tajikistan changed his name Imomali Sharipovich Rakhmonov to Emomali Rahmon, distancing himself from his Slavic name and adopting a more traditional one. In 2020, Tajik lawmakers even passed a law that children of parents who had Slavic surnames with the suffixes -ov and -ova would now receive a Tajik suffix in their passports. Another notable example of de-Russification is the Kazakh decision to change their alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin, a decision that should be fully implemented by 2025 (Welle, 2017; RFE/RL's Tajik Service, 2020).

4.5. General Overview of Regional Security: Environmental Sector.

4.5.1. Water Challenges in Central Asia.

Another issue of conflict in Central Asia concerns water scarcity and competition over water. During the Soviet era, countries exchanged water and energy freely, as everything was regulated from above, including infrastructure construction. However, the independence of the five CAR resulted in ageing infrastructure and an increase in conflicts over water and energy, more than 70 conflicts took place between 2004 and 2015, with water often being the central issue. These conflicts primarily occurred between the upstream and downstream countries of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. Whereas

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan require large amounts of water for their cotton production, agriculture and because of their rising populations, the upstream nations of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan need it primarily in order to meet their energy needs (Kurmanalieva, 2018; Crisis Group, 2020).

The most significant project involves the construction of the Rogun dam, which is set to become the largest in the world. The energy to be generated by this dam is equivalent to three nuclear power plants, and neighbouring countries have already expressed their desire to buy power from Tajikistan in the future (We Build Value, 2021). This project, which was already started during the Soviet era and came to a standstill for a long time after 1991, has also caused problems for a long time. In 2012, Former Uzbek President Karimov threatened Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan with war if they continued building the Rogun dam and the Kambarata dam. However, Karimov's death in 2016 caused a thaw and new president Mirziyoyev appeared to drop opposition to the dam. This resulted in the signing of an agreement with Kyrgyzstan involving a border dispute over a water reservoir. At the same time, Mirziyoyev expressed interest in purchasing energy from Tajikistan in the future once the Rogun dam is completed. For his part, Tajik President Rahmon assured that he would never leave his neighbours without water (Lillis, 2018; Reuters, 2018; Eurasianet, 2021; Cap, 2023).

4.5.2. Cooperation Regarding the Aral Sea.

One of the most significant climate disasters in recent times concerns the Aral Sea, once one of the world's largest inland water reservoirs have been deeply affected by the consequences of extensive cotton production. This production which diverted substantial amounts of water from the rivers that flowed into the lake. Since the 1960s, the Aral Sea has experienced a drastic reduction in water levels, with approximately 90% of its volume disappearing. This ecological disaster has had a profound impact on all five CAR. Besides the disappearance of the large-scale fishing that once took place there, pesticides and waste resulting from weapons testing have now been exposed on the former lake bed. The pollution can be stirred up during storms, affecting the surrounding lands and leading to various health issues, including diseases and cancer in Central Asia (Mambra, 2022; The Meaning of Water, 2022).

In response to these environmental and ecological challenges, the five CAR established on the 4th of January 1993 the 'International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea' (IFAS). This organisation has focused on addressing the far-reaching effects of the Aral Sea crisis. In 2008, this organisation was given an observer status in the UN. Through IFAS meetings, the Central Asian countries have engaged in collaborative efforts, resulting in joint projects in areas such as water management, social projects for local people and the implementation of desalination projects (Agency of IFAS, n.d.; IFAS, n.d.).

4.6. Hypothesis 1.

This subsection examines the extent to which evidence has been provided for hypothesis 1: *Central Asia still belongs to the Post-Soviet complex in 2023*. The term 'Post-Soviet' refers more precisely to a Russian-led complex. This hypothesis is based on the situation as it was in 2003 according to Buzan and Waever. This is done in a deductive way examining whether there is evidence for this hypothesis

based on the overall security overview in Central Asia since 2003, as reported in the methodology of this thesis.

This thesis' overview shows that Russia and most of the Central Asian countries are politically and militarily connected through the CSTO and the SCO. Notably although the CSTO did not intervene during the unrest in southern Kyrgyzstan, it did engage in 2022 with members of the organization recognizing this event in Kazakhstan as a threat for the entire CSTO region. Research into SCO policy documents resulted in a joint commitment to fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism. This trinity resonates deeply in both Russia and the CAR as they are all autocratic countries with a fear for colour revolutions. Moreover, several Central Asian countries also face security issues in autonomous regions of their country.

Through the auspices of the CSTO, Russia has a military presence in three of the five Central Asian countries, and also had a military presence in Uzbekistan during 2006-2012. In addition to this military presence, military exercises are regularly held in which Russia and the Central Asian CSTO members practice. In the SCO this also happens together with Uzbekistan. Russia also appears to be the largest arms supplier in terms of TIV in all five CAR in the period since 2003.

In addition to military cooperation, Russia and the CAR also cooperate politically. This is primarily facilitated through the CIS and the SCO. Research into both organizations has produced a picture since 2003 of an ever-growing political alliance between the member states. Meetings between the countries are taking place at an increasing number of levels and in more and more policy areas. Cross-border drug trafficking is collectively viewed as a regional problem to be tackled together, and there is a shared advocacy for cooperation in the public sector. Since 2022, a Russia-Central Asia summit has also been established, offering a new platform for a political dialogue between the countries.

In the economic dimension, there has also been an ever-developing economic integration between Russia and the countries of Central Asia since 2003. The CIS facilitated a free trade zone, with Turkmenistan being the only exception. Since 2014, Russia has also made an agreement with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that allows free movement of people, goods, capital and services. Furthermore, Russia wields considerable economic influence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (and to a lesser extent in Uzbekistan), in terms of labour migration. These countries rely for a significant part of their GDP on remittances that are sent back by the migrant workers to their home countries. This gives Russia political influence in addition to economic influence as it can put pressure on these countries through the potential to stop issuing visas to migrant workers.

In the societal dimension, Russia still has influence because of the Soviet legacy. For example, the vast majority of the inhabitants of Central Asia still speak Russian. Russia also seeks to retain its influence through the 'Russki mir' institutions, of which there are quite a few in Central Asia. Despite this, in recent years there has been a slight resistance from Central Asia against Russia and the Russian language. Noteworthy examples include the Kazakh decision to adopt the Latin script, and the de-Russification of surnames in Tajikistan, in which President Rahmon himself participated. In the environmental sector, no information has emerged from the overall security overview that points to major security events involving both Russia and the Central Asian countries.

Sufficient evidence has been found in both the military and political dimensions, each carrying a weightage of 30%, to affirm the existence of an RSC in which both Russia and the CAR are part. Most actors are or were linked to each other through organizations and share common security challenges.

In the economic sector, accounting for 20% weightage, effective cooperation between the actors is observed, with some CARs also being highly dependent on Russia due to remittances. In the societal sector, which carries 10% weightage, there is also sufficient evidence to state that the CAR are part of the Post-Soviet complex. Russia's cultural and linguistic influence still remains strong, and attempts at de-Russification of some CARs only provide evidence of Russia's influence in the region in this area.

Only for the environmental sector, which also carries 10% weightage, no evidence was found for a Central Asian presence in a Russian-dominated security complex. With the sum of the weightages reaching up to a total of 90%, it can be convincingly concluded that Central Asia continues to be a part of the Post-Soviet complex in 2023.

4.7. Hypothesis 2.

This subsection examines the extent to which evidence has been provided for hypothesis 2: *Central Asia has integrated into a Chinese security complex in 2023*. This hypothesis is based on the situation as it was in 2003 according to Buzan and Waever. This is done in a deductive way examining whether there is evidence for this hypothesis based on the overall security overview in Central Asia since 2003, as reported in the methodology of this thesis.

The overall security overview demonstrates that the CAR and China are cooperating militarily through the SCO. Joint military exercises are referred to as counter-terrorism exercises where terrorism, separatism and extremism are viewed as common threats. This shared danger primarily originates from the fear of terrorism and extremism perceived as potential dangers emanating from Afghanistan. The mutual fear of separatism is rooted in the autocratic nature of the regimes and their fear of colour revolutions, with China, in particular, fearing potential spillover effects in their Xinjiang province.

There is hardly any Chinese military presence in Central Asia, although an outpost was opened in Tajikistan in 2021 where, despite Chinese denial of its military nature, the Washington post noted a Chinese military presence. Chinese arms sales to the CAR lag behind those of Russia, although it has increased in recent years primarily to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, both of which are not members of the CSTO.

Politically, there is also cooperation between the CAR and China, with the SCO being the most important institution. Since its establishment in 2004, there has been an ever-developing and intensifying political cooperation at various administrative levels. There is even talk of friendship between the countries. In May 2023, the first China-Central Asia summit took place, further highlighting the growing political cooperation.

In the economic sector, China initially lagged behind Russia. However, since the beginning of the research period of this thesis, China has taken on an increasingly prominent economic role. From 2004 onwards, this has been reflected in the construction of several pipeline projects that transport oil and gas directly from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to China, whereby the other CAR also benefits as a transit country. The BRI, which was kicked off in Kazakhstan, has also further promoted economic cooperation. The countries in Central Asia benefit from numerous Chinese infrastructure projects. Geopolitical developments in Russia seem to be fostering cooperation between the CAR and China, bypassing Russia as a transit country.

The role of the Uyghurs is significant in the societal sector. Three countries in Central Asia border China's Xinjiang province, and among them, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have a notable Uyghur minority. While some CAR presidents appear to downplay Chinese human rights violations, and in some cases even express support for Chinese policies in this province, these policies have sparked protests and, in some instances, even violence among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz populations. Additionally, there is a significant presence of Confucius institutions in the CAR. The general security overview does not identify any evidence regarding major security issues in the relationship between the CAR and China.

Although there is military cooperation through the SCO, the limited Chinese presence in Central Asia and relatively low Chinese arms sales to all CAR indicate a lack of substantial evidence supporting the integration of Central Asia into a Chinese security complex. Therefore, the military dimension, which carries a weight of 30%, cannot be assigned. The political sector, which also has a weighting of 30%, does provide evidence of Central Asian integration into a Chinese security complex. This is evident through increased political cooperation particularly showcased by the SCO and the 2023 summit. Furthermore, the economic sector, with a weighting of 20%, provides evidence for the hypothesis, since 2004 there has been an increasing Chinese economic influence in Central Asia, whereby agreements are increasingly made without the intervention of Russia.

In the societal sector, which holds a weightage of 10%, the Uyghur issue and the significant presence of Confucius institutions contribute to the evidence for hypothesis 2. However, in the environmental sector, weighted at 10%, no evidence supporting the hypothesis was found. In total, the weights sum up to 60%, providing moderate evidence for the integration of Central Asia into a Chinese security complex.

4.8. Hypothesis 3.

This subsection examines the extent to which evidence has been provided for hypothesis 3: *Central Asia has broken away from the Post-Soviet complex and has formed its own independent regional security complex in 2023*. This hypothesis is based on the situation as it was in 2003 according to Buzan and Waever. This is done in a deductive way examining whether there is evidence for this hypothesis based on the overall security overview in Central Asia since 2003, as reported in the methodology of this thesis.

The general security overview indicates that Central Asia is heavily dependent militarily on Russia, primarily, and to a lesser extent China. No evidence was found suggesting that the CAR managed to break away from the Post-Soviet Complex militarily during the research period. Arms trade among the five republics is minimal, and there is no evidence of mutual military presence.

In the political dimension, the general security overview leads to a similar conclusion. Political cooperation takes place primarily through international organizations endorsed by Russia and China. The consultative meetings taking place since 2018 are the first potential step toward increased political autonomy in Central Asia. However, these meetings do not yet carry the same weight as the political organizations linked with the two big neighbours. As such, it is currently too early to refer to this as the formation of a distinct security region.

In the economic dimension, there have been initial attempts at regional economic integration. However, due to Russian interference, this has not been successful. Economic integration among the five CAR is now limited to bilateral agreements between them. While consultative meetings have explored the collective economic potential of Central Asia, they have yet to produce a concrete economic platform independent of Russia and China.

In the societal dimension, a regional Central Asian security issue exists regarding the Ferghana Valley. Tensions and conflicts have occasionally arisen among some of the CAR within this region, with a notable instance in 2010 when a request for support to the CSTO was turned down. Some of the CAR face security issues in autonomous regions or problems concerning the Uyghur minority. However, these problems are not exclusively Central Asian and are shared with their larger neighbours. Linguistically and culturally, one cannot speak of a region either. After all, the languages of the five countries belong to different language families.

The environmental dimension is pre-eminently the sector of Central Asian security. Water scarcity has led to several conflicts in the region. The death of Uzbek President Karimov in 2016 led to a relaxation of tensions between the countries in Central Asia and resulted in increasing cooperation on this issue. Some border disputes over water resources were resolved, and Uzbekistan even expressed interest in sourcing energy from the Rogun Dam. Another case is the problem stemming from the Aral Sea crisis. Through the IFAS, the five CAR are trying to work on new projects in order to address the consequences of this problem. These are examples of a common regional security problem in which an attempt is then made to desecuritize it.

The evidence demonstrates that in both the military and political sectors, which each hold a 30% weighting, no support was found for Hypothesis 3. Similarly, in the economic sector, which carries a 20% weight, no evidence supporting the hypothesis was found. In all three of these dimensions, Central Asian countries remain overly reliant on their two large neighbours. The societal dimension, which has a 10% weight, presents a doubtful case. Conflict in the Fergana Valley and the 2010 refusal by the CSTO to intervene in the conflict could indicate the presence of a Central Asian security region. However, the fact that the CSTO was requested is a point that contradicts this evidence.

In addition, many security problems in the societal dimension, such as those involving the Uighurs, are security problems they share with China. Linguistically and culturally, Central Asia cannot yet be defined as its own security region. As such, there is still insufficient evidence in this dimension to support Hypothesis 3. Regarding the environmental sector, with a weighting of 10%, water scarcity and the Aral Sea case provide sufficient evidence for hypothesis 3. Therefore, in total, there is 10% supporting evidence for Hypothesis 3.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter addresses the primary research question formulated in light of the three hypotheses proposed in this study. Additionally, it will examine the limitations of the research and provide recommendations for future research.

5.1. Answering the Research Question Based on the Hypotheses.

In this study, an attempt was made to update the 20-year-old RSCT of Buzan and Waever. In 2003, they stated that Central Asia is a weak subcomplex within the Russian-dominated Post-Soviet Complex (Buzan & Waever, 2003, pp. 423-426). A literature review on this topic revealed that scholars hold different views on who the most important security actor in Central Asia is. Therefore, it was decided to conduct research on the current state of affairs in this region based on the RSCT. The research aimed to answer the following main question: *To which RSC does Central Asia belong in 2023?*

Considering the three different views from the literature review. Three hypotheses were formulated in order to answer the main question.

Hypothesis 1: Central Asia still belongs to the Post-Soviet complex in 2023.

Hypothesis 2: Central Asia has integrated into a Chinese security complex in 2023.

Hypothesis 3: Central Asia has broken away from the Post-Soviet complex and has formed its own independent regional security complex in 2023.

Based on five multidimensional security sectors, a comprehensive overview of regional security in Central Asia during the period 2003-2023 has been provided. On the base of this overview, it was deductively determined to what extent evidence could be found for the three hypotheses. This research revealed the following findings: hypothesis 1 had 90% supporting evidence, hypothesis 2 had 60% supporting evidence, and hypothesis 3 had 10% supporting evidence. In summary, hypothesis 1 received the most substantial evidence by a large margin.

Therefore, the research question posed: *To which RSC does Central Asia belong in 2023?* can be answered as follows: Central Asia is still part of the Russian-dominated Post-Soviet complex in 2023. In almost all dimensions, with the exception of the environmental, evidence has been found for a Central Asian presence in a Russian-dominated security complex. However, it is important to note that hypothesis 2, which suggested an increasing role for China and which received 60% supporting evidence, also holds significance. Particularly noteworthy is China's growing influence, especially in the economic dimension, particularly in the more recent years of the research period.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a lot has changed in international relations, impacting Central Asia as a whole, and also in their relationship with China. Although an attempt has been made to include as much of the consequences for this region as possible in this study, the true implications of this new geopolitical reality will only become clear in the coming years. It would therefore be interesting to conduct a follow-up research in the future, to see what the consequences of the war in

Ukraine are for Central Asia, considering the research question of this thesis in light of these developments.

5.2. Limitations of the Research and Recommendations on Future Research

While every effort in this thesis has been made to address the research question, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The first limitation of this study concerns the choices made in the general security overview. Although an attempt has been made to provide the best possible overview of important security events since 2003 for all five multidimensional sectors, some matters were not explored in great detail, because of the word length. This research is qualitative in nature, however, the inclusion of quantitative methods, such as interviews or surveys among citizens of the CAR, in which, for instance, they could be asked about their opinion on Russian and Chinese influences.

Another important limitation of this research concerns its focus solely on the influence of Russia and China. Something that may ignore the influence of other actors. To achieve an even more comprehensive understanding of regional security dynamics in Central Asia, future research could focus on the influence of other actors, such as those of the European Union or India. Incorporating a broader regional perspective would allow researchers to better capture the multi-faceted nature of security dynamics in Central Asia.

It is also essential to consider the availability of data. In this study, efforts were made to utilize primary government sources to the fullest extent possible. However, in practice, it turned out that not every international organization or Central Asian government had equal accessibility to sources. While policy documents from the SCO and the CSTO were easily available on their websites. In the case of the Central Asian consultative meetings, it was often difficult to find the authentic source of the joint statements after these meetings.

Finally, it is crucial to consider the dynamic nature of regional security events in general and in Central Asia in particular. Throughout the course of this research, noteworthy new events constantly unfolded, which I have tried to incorporate as much as possible in this research. An example of such an event is the China-Central Asia Summit that took place recently. However, given the rapidly evolving nature of regional security in Central Asia, it is necessary to continuously monitor events. Future research could focus on this aspect, especially with regard to the consequences that the war in Ukraine and current developments in Russia will have for this region.

5.3. Critical Reflection

It is crucial to address the social and ethical aspects involved in writing this research. Throughout the research process for this thesis and writing about regional security in Central Asia, I have been constantly aware that this topic is more than mere words within an academic study. These are security issues that significantly impact the lives of residents and communities in Central Asia on a daily basis.

Central Asia is a diverse region that is home to a variety of ethnic, religious, linguistic and religious identities. Security-related developments described in this study may have important consequences for these communities in Central Asia. Recognizing the importance of these consequences, I have maintained a constant awareness of the potential impacts on these communities throughout the research process.

As this research primarily relies on qualitative methods and utilizes publicly available policy documents from governments and international organizations, there is no inherent risk posed to the individuals who authored these documents. The information extracted from these sources is already in the public domain. However, it is crucial to note that when employing quantitative research methods like interviews and surveys, for example, if conducted among the population of Central Asia, ethical considerations and safeguards must be upheld.

Finally, it is important to engage in critical self-reflection regarding my own role as a researcher in this thesis. In addition to the aforementioned social and ethical responsibilities that you have as a researcher, it is good to know that the highest possible level of integrity has been strived for. Every effort has been made to approach all the actors discussed in this research with respect and without bias. By consciously acknowledging my own potential biases and striving for objectivity, I aim to ensure that the research findings are presented in a fair and unbiased manner. This reflective approach contributes to the credibility and reliability of the research outcomes.

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Appendix 1: List of Government Agreements and Documents

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