

Small State Foreign Policy in Central Asia: The Cases of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan

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ABSTRACT *This article examines and compares the foreign policy preferences of three small states in Central Asia, namely Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, in the post-independence era. Although the three countries share similar features, such as a common Soviet legacy, landlocked position, and population size, the foreign policy behavior differs in Turkmenistan. While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan align with Russia, Turkmenistan embraces permanent neutrality. This study argues that natural resource endowment, coupled with fewer internal threats and geographical constraints compared to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, helped Turkmenistan to pursue a neutral and more independent foreign policy. Yet, over-reliance on China as the major buyer of Turkmen natural gas may make it difficult to sustain permanent neutrality.*

Keywords: Small State, Foreign Policy, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan

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Introduction

Small states in the international system are recognized by their limited capacity in terms of territorial size, population, gross domestic product (GDP), and military prowess. Population particularly stands out among other material indicators while identifying the smallness of a state. Countries with less than 10 million populations have been considered small powers since the 1960s. Additionally, a state's self-perception regarding its place on the international stage is accepted as another signifier in determining its size. Small powers are defined as the states that are cognizant of the fact that they are unable to ensure their security without help from other states, institutions, or processes.¹

Material and structural constraints of the small powers induce them to concentrate their foreign policy activities on neighboring and regional areas most of the time.² Caution, moderation, and risk-aversion prevail in their relations with the more powerful states. They usually avoid utilizing military force as a technique of statecraft and prefer resorting to diplomatic channels and instruments.³ Alliance with great power, playing an active role in regional and/or international institutions, or pursuing a policy of neutrality are the most prevalent diplomatic methods adopted by the leaders of the small states to cope with the vagaries of a complex and intimidating outside world.

Small states in close geographical proximity to powers with extensive offensive capabilities, especially in the case of unavailability of allies or outside aid, may toe the line of great power by demonstrating bandwagoning behavior.⁴ Aligning with great power may also have some financial benefits, such as access to large markets and foreign capital. The small state may also enhance its status vis-à-vis the other states in its immediate neighborhood and global sphere.

The second foreign policy behavior embraced by small states is to devote time, energy, and resources to regional and/or multilateral institutions. These kinds of organizations appeal to small powers as they endorse formal equality between their members, they have the potential to restrain the designs and activities of powerful states, and they function as platforms of consultation, discussion, and information exchange between states of varying caliber.⁵ Moreover, some of the small powers bring to the agenda of these regional and/or international institutions some global matters such as education, environment, health, and human rights and contribute to the setting of new principles, rules, and norms in these problem areas. This norm entrepreneur attitude eventually boosts the reputation of the small powers, thus indirectly assisting the realization of their goals in other priority realms.⁶

Neutrality is the third foreign policy behavior adopted by the small states. It may be defined as not taking part in a war. Permanent/perpetual neutral-

ity, which is usually codified in the constitution or is declared via treaty, requires a state to maintain neutrality both in war and peaceful times, whereas classic/traditional neutrality is often not coded and is activated in the case of an outbreak of war.⁷ Small states pursue neutrality to avoid being compelled to take sides in a probable conflict between great powers. Neutrality works better when the small power is politically non-assertive and strategically irrelevant.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union precipitated the emergence of many small states in the Baltic region, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are among these small states located in Central Asia. While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have preferred aligning with Russia, Turkmenistan has embraced permanent neutrality since 1995. This article explores the underlying causes of the foreign policy preferences of these three small Central Asian republics in the post-independence period.

The international relations (IR) literature has its share of small state studies focusing on post-Soviet states' foreign policy behavior.⁸ However, there is a dearth of research on the foreign policy behavior of small Central Asian states, although some studies exist that concentrate on foreign policy making in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.⁹ Yet, the literature is devoid of a study that examines the foreign policy preferences of these Central Asian republics in the post-Soviet era from a comparative perspective. The main contribution of this article to the IR literature is to fill the gap in this realm.

Research Framework

The study uses John Stuart Mill's System of Logic/Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). This method necessitates the selection of cases that differ concerning the independent variables, whereas all contesting variables are held constant. It becomes possible to isolate the explanatory value of the independent variable by choosing countries that are geographically and culturally close to each other.¹⁰ The MSSD is especially suitable for area studies as the countries that are part of a certain region may have a common history, religion, and culture. It helps to identify the main features that differ among similar countries and that account for the outcome.¹¹

The Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan share many similar characteristics, such as common Soviet legacy, landlocked posi-



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tion, and population size. Yet, as the dependent variable in this small-N research design, foreign policy behavior differs in Turkmenistan. The research framework used in the article is based on three independent variables, namely internal threat, natural resource endowment, and geography.

Internal threats include efforts to overthrow governments, struggles to control state institutions, competition for resources, and ethnic or religious movements that vie for autonomy or independence. These domestic security considerations impact the foreign policy decisions of states. The ethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek minorities that took place in Osh on the verge of the disintegration of the Soviet Union recurred in the spring of 2010. On the other hand, Tajikistan had to grapple with a civil war between 1992 and 1997. Turkmenistan, however, did not suffer from internal vulnerabilities emanating from ethnic or religious conflicts, which helped the country to sustain its independent standing.

Natural resource endowment encompasses the possession of land, water, and sea resources that are provided by nature. Of all these three small Central Asian states, Turkmenistan owns the most critical, economically valuable, and thus expensive natural resource, natural gas. As an energy-rich country, Turkmenistan is much closer to economic self-sufficiency than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These two countries retain scarce natural resources and depend on energy imports. This advantage equips Turkmenistan with greater foreign policy choices than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The geographic location may also play an important role in the foreign policy preferences of small states with limited capabilities. The possibility of external attacks, refugee flows, and infiltration of criminals and extremists through borders increases the importance of neighbors for small powers. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's neighborhood with China's problematic Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and Tajikistan and Turkmenistan's neighborhood with volatile Afghanistan impinge on the foreign policy actions of these countries. Turkmenistan is in a much more advantageous position regarding geography as well. The country does not share borders with China, and the Turkmen-Afghan frontier is much calmer than the Tajik-Afghan border despite the surge in incidents instigated by radical Islamic groups.

The study's initial hypothesis is that natural resource endowment, coupled with fewer internal threats and geographical constraints compared to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, paved the way for more independent and flexible foreign

policy standing on behalf of Turkmenistan. The following three parts will test the veracity of this hypothesis by examining the influence of independent variables on the foreign policy behavior of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

The Impact of Internal Threats on Foreign Policy Orientation

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ensuing independence came at a time when Kyrgyzstan was grappling with the implications of serious ethnic conflict and political instability. The summer of 1990 had witnessed bloody infighting between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek minority in the South-Western city of Osh, which was triggered by the Kyrgyz government's grab of an Uzbek collective farm and handover of it to the landless Kyrgyz farmers. The Osh events and the rising democratic tide precipitated a political crisis in the country that resulted in the election of Askar Akayev to the presidency of Kyrgyzstan in October 1990. Akayev decided to pursue a multi-vector policy that encompassed close relations with major global powers, rising middle powers, neighboring states, and international organizations.¹²

Kyrgyzstan's initial move was to re-establish political, economic, and security ties with its former patron Russia. Kyrgyzstan became one of the founding members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and put its signature on the Treaty on Increased Integration in Economic and Humanitarian Fields and the CIS Collective Security Treaty (CST). Kyrgyzstan also embarked on a political and economic liberalization path to receive the much-needed Western financial aid.

Growing internal security concerns stemming from the regional developments led Kyrgyzstan to give more weight to the Russian dimension in its foreign policy starting at the end of the 1990s. The Batken incident, during which the militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan aimed to overthrow the Islam Karimov regime in Uzbekistan by invading Southern Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 1999, prompted Kyrgyzstan to bolster its security cooperation with Russia. The bleak condition of the Kyrgyz army also became a triggering factor for the establishment of closer security ties with Russia. The command, control, and communication systems of the defense units were in poor condition, and the Ministry of Defense lacked a reputable reputation due to the constant corruption scandals.¹³

Russia lent backing to Kyrgyzstan's fight against international terrorism. The regional CIS anti-terrorist center was opened in Bishkek in August 2001, as well as the headquarters for the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces of the Central Asian Region. The CST was transformed into a regional security



Presidents line up, from left to right: Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedow and Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev; while attending the 4th consultative meeting of the heads of states of Central Asia in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan on July 21, 2022.
Kyrgyz Presidency / AA

organization in October 2002 and named Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In October 2003, Russia reopened its Soviet-era military airbase in Kant under the auspices of the CSTO, thus consolidating its security collaboration with Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan also signed the Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the regional cooperation organization spearheaded by China and Russia, on June 7, 2002. In accordance with these developments, Russia was identified as a strategic partner in the new foreign policy concept of Kyrgyzstan that was announced in January 2007.¹⁴

The outburst of inter-communal violence in the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad in the Southern parts of the country between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks in June 2010 sped up Kyrgyzstan's alignment with Russia. The conflict also reflected the North-South inter-regional confrontation and competition between the clans. Some of the Uzbek groups that had sided with the opposition against the rule of former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who was also a Southerner, were assaulted by the factions close to the Bakiyev in Jalal-Abad.¹⁵

Although Russia declined Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayeva's calls for intervention in the conflict within the CSTO framework, Kyrgyzstan considered Russia an important counterweight in its knotty relationship with Uzbekistan

as the two states continuously sparred over border issues, management of shared water resources, and Kyrgyzstan's treatment of its Uzbek minority. Russia continues to be Kyrgyzstan's major security partner. Moscow fulfills over 80 percent of Bishkek's weapon and military equipment needs.¹⁶ Kyrgyz soldiers are trained in Russian military academies, and Kyrgyz troops carry out regular military exercises with their Russian counterparts under the umbrella of the CSTO and the SCO. In March 2019, Kyrgyzstan also allowed the expansion of the Russian airbase in Kant.

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Tajikistan, similar to Kyrgyzstan, rebuilt its political and security bonds with Russia shortly after independence by becoming a founding member of the CIS and the CST. The civil war in May 1992 further solidified the security cooperation between the two countries. The Tajik civil war took place in the form of a rebellion of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which was composed of Islamist, nationalist, and liberal democratic groups, against the Tajik government. It also echoed regional cleavages as the opposition was mostly composed of groups from the Gharm and Gorno-Badakhshan areas. On the other hand, the government was made up of people from the Khujand region. The region had hosted most of the ruling elite during the Soviet era. It was also supported by people from the Kulyab region who had retained high-ranking posts in the internal security establishment of the country. The war lasted five years, took the lives of more than 100,000 people, and inflicted considerable damage on the country's infrastructure. Worried about the spreading of radical Islamic currents in Central Asia that might take a grip on its Muslim population, Russia responded positively to Tajikistan's calls for support. Russian border guards started to protect Tajikistan's porous borders in 1992, and Russia spearheaded the deployment of CIS peacekeeping troops in the country in September 1993.¹⁷ Furthermore, Moscow played a significant mediation role between the Tajik government and the UTO for the signing of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in June 1997, which ended the war. Although the civil war resulted in the victory of the Kulyab clan with Emomali Rahmonov assuming the office of president in 1994, the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast continued to be a restive region and has become the object of military operations along with central government demands for disarmament throughout the years.¹⁸

Tajikistan also appraised closer security interaction with Russia as a balancing factor against the encroachments of Uzbekistan. The two states have been in a convoluted relationship since the early days of independence over myriad issues, such as territorial claims, border demarcation, sharing of water resources,

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and treatment of ethnic minorities. Although Tashkent extended military help to Dushanbe in its war against the UTO, Tajikistan was wary of Uzbekistan's relations with the ethnic Uzbek local warlords that revolted against the government in 1998.¹⁹

Tajik President Rahmonov signed the treaty that transformed the Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division into a military base during his visit to Moscow in April 1999. The base was formally opened in October 2004, and Russia took control of the Okno space monitoring facility. Tajikistan became one of the founding members of the SCO in 2002 and also participated in the CSTO in October 2002. Russia, akin to Kyrgyzstan, supplies over 80 percent of the weapon and military equipment needs of Tajikistan.²⁰ The two countries carry out joint military exercises, and Tajik military personnel receive training in Russian military academies.

Turkmenistan did not experience internal conflicts as opposed to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the wake of independence. Relations with Uzbekistan had been volatile during the late 1990s and early 2000s because of border skirmishes, water management, and minority treatment issues. Yet, the Uzbek minority of Turkmenistan did not get involved in armed clashes with the government or the Turkmen population. The relative internal stability brought out a more independent and flexible foreign policy line. Although Turkmenistan was one of the signatories of the Alma-Ata Protocol, the preparatory document of the CIS, it did not ratify the CIS Charter. Ashgabat joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Partnership for Peace program in 1994, but the scope of the cooperation was limited to humanitarian issues and the training of military personnel.²¹

A major breakthrough occurred in Turkmenistan's foreign policy in March 1995, when Niyazov declared that Turkmenistan was ready to assume all the obligations of a permanently neutral state. The UN General Assembly officially recognized the permanent neutral position of the country on December 12, 1995, and Turkmenistan adopted the requisite amendments to its constitution on December 27, 1995.²² Accordingly, Ashgabat pledged not to initiate wars or join in one except in self-defense cases. It also announced that it would not have, produce or distribute weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, it enunciated that it would neither participate in inter-state associations with collective responsibilities nor permit foreign states to use extant military facilities or set up new military bases on its territory.²³ In line with the new status of Turkmenistan, Russian border guards left the country in 1999. Turkmenistan underlined the neutral character of its foreign policy line in the foreign policy concepts declared in 2008 and 2017. Yet, the latter defined Russia as a strategic partner.²⁴

It is difficult for small states with limited capabilities to cope with internal security challenges. Furthermore, when a small state also perceives a threat from an ambitious regional power amidst dealing with inter-communal fight, radical groups, or civil war, as in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it may opt for bandwagoning with great power in exchange for security support. On the other hand, a small state that is less sensitive to internal threats, like Turkmenistan, may embrace a neutral position.

The Influence of Natural Resource Endowment on Foreign Policy Behavior

Kyrgyzstan is bereft of any significant energy resources. The country is rich in minerals such as antimony, gold, and uranium but its oil and natural gas resources are quite negligible. Hydropower accounts for two-thirds of energy production in the country. Yet, Kyrgyzstan relies on hydrocarbon resources for more than half of its energy needs, especially during the winter. It imports more than 90 percent of oil products and natural gas, mostly from Russia and Kazakhstan.²⁵

The energy dependence on Russia, coupled with Moscow's extension of loans to the Kyrgyz government and the growing numbers of Kyrgyz workers on Russian territory, earned Russia an important bargaining chip in its relationship with Kyrgyzstan. When Kyrgyz President Bakiyev backtracked from his promise to demand Washington to evacuate the Manas International Airport, which had been utilized by the U.S. aircraft since December 2001, in accordance with NATO's military operation against the Taliban forces in Afghanistan, he received a strong reaction from Russian Premier Vladimir Putin. Russia revoked the preferred customs duties on April 1, 2010, which Kyrgyzstan had been receiving on Russian energy imports. This led to a major hike in electricity fees that became one of the reasons for protests that led to the resignation of Bakiyev from the presidency on April 15, 2010.²⁶ Bakiyev's successor Almazbek Atambayev approved the 15-year extension of the lease of the Kant airbase, and Russia agreed to construct four hydropower plants on the Naryn River in September 2012. Moreover, Gazprom purchased a 100 percent share of KyrgyzGas in July 2013.²⁷

Kyrgyzstan also speeded up its economic collaboration with China, which was much more willing than Russia to invest in the promising metallurgy industry in the country. China also undertook significant energy infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan, such as the modernization of electricity transmission lines in Southern regions, the heat and power plant in Bishkek, and the construction of the Datka-Kemin electricity transmission line.²⁸ However, Chinese investments and projects were not without liabilities. Chinese mining firms were accused of polluting the environment and compounding the unemployment

problem of the local population by bringing in the Chinese workforce. Furthermore, Beijing's possession of nearly 43 percent of Bishkek's external debt aggravates the apprehension about China in Kyrgyzstan as Kyrgyz people are afraid of Chinese appropriation of land and resources to compensate for the country's unpaid debts.²⁹

Russia's fallout with the West in the wake of the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 made it quite difficult for Kyrgyzstan to pursue a multi-vector policy. Economic and security dependence on Moscow induced Bishkek to bandwagon with Russia. Kyrgyzstan recognized the results of the controversial Crimean status referendum on which Russia grounded its annexation declaration and also abstained from voting on the UN Resolution on Territorial Integrity of Ukraine.³⁰ The American troops vacated the Manas airbase in June 2014, and Kyrgyzstan became a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in August 2015. However, this decision presaged some difficulties for the Kyrgyz economy, such as a huge decline in resale trade in Dordoi and Karasuu bazaars due to the imposition of tariffs on non-EEU merchandise and the brimming of local markets with cheap Kazakh and Russian products. Russia, to cushion the economic difficulties of Kyrgyzstan, granted a migration amnesty to the Kyrgyz citizens at the end of 2018 that proved to be a vital decision for the well-being of the Kyrgyz economy as remittances, 98 percent of which came from Kyrgyz workers residing in Russia, made up 29.2 percent of the GDP in Kyrgyzstan in 2019.³¹

Tajikistan, similar to Kyrgyzstan, has rich deposits of antimony, gold, and silver but lacks significant oil and natural gas resources. Hydropower is the country's main energy source; however, it is susceptible to seasonal shortages, especially in winter. Therefore, hydrocarbon resources are widely used to meet the country's energy needs. Russia fulfills more than 60 percent of the hydrocarbon needs of Tajikistan. Moscow also contributed to constructing the Sangtuda-1 hydroelectric power station in the country.³²

Tajikistan also obtained the help of Iran and China to develop its hydropower potential. Iran, the country with which Tajikistan enjoyed close historical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic bonds, kicked off the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric power plant project in December 2006. In 2009 China concluded agreements with the Tajik government to build the Nurabad-1 hydropower plant and a central heating and power plant in Dushanbe.³³ Beijing helped Dushanbe to restart the Rogun hydropower plant project after Moscow backed off from the venture due to the objections of Uzbekistan. Moreover, China expedited the modernization and construction of the country's energy infrastructure. The Chinese Tebian Electric Apparatus Stock Company started the Lolazar-Khatlon 220 KW transmission and transformation project and the North-South power transmission line project in May 2006.³⁴

China was also awarded tenders to develop many silver and gold mines in Tajikistan. Yet, the environmentally destructive extraction methods of the Chinese mining companies, Chinese firms' unwillingness to hire local labor, and Tajikistan's transfer of the majority shares in some of its mining companies to China in return for unpaid debts cast doubts about the future viability of these investments. Indebtedness to Beijing is especially a serious matter for Dushanbe as China accounts for 52 percent of Tajikistan's foreign debt.³⁵

Security and energy dependence on Russia prompted Tajikistan to back up Russia's policy line regarding the Crimean crisis. Dushanbe, similar to Bishkek, abstained from voting on the UN Resolution on Territorial Integrity of Ukraine on March 27, 2014, which affirmed commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine.³⁶ Yet, Tajikistan eschewed joining the EEU, worrying about the repercussions of the loss in customs duties on its fragile economy. Russia, in retaliation, complicated the bureaucratic procedures for the entry of migrant workers of non-EEU countries into its territory, which might take a toll on the Tajik economy as more than 1 million Tajik workers set foot in Russia on an annual basis, and the remittances they sent comprised 28.2 percent of Tajikistan's GDP in 2019.³⁷

Turkmenistan, different from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, owns substantial natural resources. The country holds the world's fourth largest natural gas reserves (688.1 trillion cubic feet)³⁸ and some oil reserves (600 million barrels).³⁹ In the early years of independence, Turkmenistan relied on the Gazprom-controlled Central Asia-Center gas pipeline network for its natural gas exports. Yet, cognizant of the fact that the preservation of permanent neutrality necessitated being economically self-sufficient, Turkmenistan, since the late 1990s, had sped up efforts to ensure route diversification of natural gas exports which constituted the lion's share of its budget. The first step in this direction became the inauguration of the Korpeje –Kordkuy gas pipeline in December 1997, through which the Turkmen gas flowed to supply the Northern regions of Iran.

For some time, Turkmenistan also promoted the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project, which anticipated the construction of an underwater pipeline that would stretch between Turkmenbashi and Baku. The project, which would bypass both Iran and Russia, was backed by the U.S. but was nipped in the bud after Türkiye, one of the key transit countries, signed the Blue Stream agreement with Russia for the building of a trans-Black Sea gas pipeline that would carry natural gas directly from Russia to Türkiye. Furthermore, Azer-

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gas pipeline elicited a positive response from Turkmenistan when Russia offered to buy all Turkmen gas. With an agreement signed in April 2003, Gazprom became the sole buyer of Turkmen gas for 25 years.⁴⁰ The sharp decline in gas prices in 2008 took a heavy toll on the Russian economy, and Russia asked for a discount on the Turkmen gas price in 2009. When the Turkmen side rejected the Russian plea, a dubious explosion⁴¹ on the gas pipeline halted the Russian gas imports until 2011. Although the two sides agreed to resume gas transfer in 2011, Russia drastically decreased the amount of gas it purchased from Turkmenistan throughout the years and cut it off completely in 2016. The end of the energy trade-off with Russia engendered a more flexible approach on the Turkmen side regarding the Crimean matter compared to the positions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Although Turkmenistan, similar to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, abstained from voting on the UN resolution that endorsed the territorial integrity of Ukraine, it eschewed signing a joint CIS⁴² statement calling for lifting Western sanctions against Russia, which were placed on the country due to the annexation of Crimea.⁴³

Turkmenistan was able to muddle through despite Russia's halting of gas imports because it succeeded in developing alternative gas pipeline routes for its gas. In December 2009, the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which carried the Turkmen gas to China's Xinjiang region through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, was inaugurated. One month later, Iran and Turkmenistan put into operation the Dauletabad-Sarakhs-Khangiran pipeline, which increased Turkmen gas exports to Iran. Energy cooperation with China loomed large as China not only imported large volumes of gas from Turkmenistan but was also involved in natural gas field development projects and the construction and repair of gas pipelines.

When Turkmenistan terminated gas supplies to Iran in January 2017 because of arrears, China's share in Turkmenistan's gas exports rose substantially. Nearly 80 percent of Turkmen gas went to China.⁴⁴ However, China's demand for a reduction in the gas price following its expanding access to the liquefied nat-

baijan and Turkmenistan's dispute over some gas fields on the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan's loss of interest in the project after the discovery of rich gas reserves in the Shah Deniz field reduced the probability of the venture.

The hurdles in the construction of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project and the slim chance of the expansion of the Korpeje-Kordkuy



Summit meeting of the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization was held at the Kremlin Palace, on the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Collective Security Treaty, and the 20th anniversary of its establishment, in Moscow Russia, May 16, 2022.

Kremlin Press Service / AA

ural gas markets, Turkmenistan's financing of Chinese infrastructural projects with its gas money and its increasing debts to China and China's reluctance to construct the high-capacity Line D of Central Asia –China gas pipeline urged Turkmenistan to reach out to Russia to resume gas exports to this country.⁴⁵ Although in modest amounts, Russia started to accept gas from Turkmenistan in April 2019. The possession of energy resources in high demand globally is a significant contributor to the economic independence of a small power, especially if a strategy of multiple pipelines and diverse buyers backs it. Despite some recent hurdles, this strategy helped Turkmenistan sustain permanent neutrality in foreign policy. Small states that are deprived of such natural resources, like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, however, become much more exposed to the encroachments of great power, especially if that great power is also their major energy provider.

Geography's Imprint on Foreign Policy Conduct

Kyrgyzstan borders China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and is also home to citizens of Uighur descent. Ethnic Uighur citizens of China occasionally try to cross the Chinese-Kyrgyz border and seek asylum in Kyrgyzstan illegally. There were cases of military clashes between the Kyrgyz border guards and Uighurs as well.⁴⁶ Increasing economic exchanges and security cooperation under the aegis of the SCO resulted in Kyrgyzstan falling in line with China regarding the Xinjiang matter. Bishkek appraised the issue as an internal matter of China and expedited the extradition of Uighur activists in Kyrgyz-

stan to China. The two countries also organized joint patrols along their common border and joint exercises in Xinjiang to fight against international terrorism, drug and weapons smuggling, and human trafficking. The revelation of the presence of re-education camps in Xinjiang in 2017, where Uighurs were claimed to be exposed to systematic torture, coercive birth prevention, and forced labor, made things difficult for Kyrgyzstan as there were also allegations regarding the disappearance of ethnic Kyrgyz into these camps.⁴⁷ Although Kyrgyzstan did not argue against the official Chinese position contending that the camps were set up for vocational education and training purposes, Bishkek eschewed signing the letters to the UN Human Rights Council that countenanced Chinese policies in Xinjiang.

The legacy of the Soviet era demarcation, the presence of two enclaves (Kayragach and Vorukh) that belong to Tajikistan and the four enclaves (Jhangail, Qalacha, Shohimardon, Sokh) that are part of Uzbekistan in Kyrgyzstan occasionally foment trouble for the country. The disputes over land, pastures, water resources, and the legitimacy of construction projects engendered violent border clashes that ended with extensive property damage and sometimes with casualties.⁴⁸ Although Uzbekistan and Tajikistan help Kyrgyzstan normalize the situation in the wake of border incidents, as long as there is a lack of agreement between Central Asian states over border demarcation and border-crossing regimes, enclaves will pose a security risk for Kyrgyzstan.

Tajikistan also shares a border with China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and has citizens of Uighur descent. However, security cooperation between the two countries remained at a modest level for years. The concern about the growing influence of radical Islamic groups and drug barons in Afghanistan has urged China and Tajikistan to step up security cooperation since 2016. Beijing established a military base in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region that bordered Afghanistan, China, and Kyrgyzstan and activated the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism that brought together China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan intending to enhance collaboration in counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing efforts.⁴⁹ The elevating military ties with Dushanbe helped Beijing make progress on the Xinjiang matter. With an agreement that came into force in July 2017, Tajikistan started to extradite convicted Uighurs to China. Dushanbe also became one of the signatories of the letter addressed to the UN Human Rights Council in August 2019, which underlined that the basic human rights of people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang were safeguarded.⁵⁰

Tajikistan's long, rugged and porous frontier with Afghanistan remains a major headache for the country. The border is poorly policed and is a major drug and weapon smuggling and human trafficking route. The retrenchment of the NATO troops in Afghanistan brought out a tighter alignment with Russia. Ta-

jikistan relied on the military aid of Russia to stave off these risks following the NATO troop cuts in Afghanistan and after the U.S. provision of weapons and military equipment to the Tajik army declined.⁵¹

The defection of Col. Gulmurod Khalimov, the commander of Tajikistan's elite police force, along with hundreds of Tajiks to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the increasing number of incidents where the Taliban kidnaped Tajik border guards bolstered the security cooperation between Russia and Tajikistan. Russia deployed sophisticated weapon systems such as Iskander-M tactical ballistic missile systems and S-300 air-defense systems to the 201st Military Base, which would be operated as part of the Russian Ground Forces until 2042, according to an agreement clinched between the two countries in October 2012.⁵² Russia and Tajikistan conducted many bilateral military drills near the Afghan border, both bilaterally and under the umbrella of the CIS, CSTO, and SCO, to counter international terrorism and transnational crimes. The open-door policy of the mid-2000s revealed in Tajikistan's Foreign Policy Concept of 2002 envisaged increasing and diversifying the security and economic partners of the country; however, it fell out of favor in the wake of the decreasing NATO involvement in Afghanistan and re-imposition of economic embargoes on Iran. This situation beefed up Russia's position as Tajikistan's strategic partner.⁵³

The Turkmen-Afghan border had been calm for most of the 1990s and early 2000s, except for minor incidents. Turkmenistan was the only Central Asian republic that had cordial relations with the Taliban until September 2001 attacks. The country retained two consulates in Afghanistan in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif. Therefore, Turkmenistan's involvement in NATO's Afghanistan operation against the Taliban differed from the experiences of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Bishkek and Dushanbe opened their airfields and granted overflight rights to American military aircraft in the fall of 2001. Turkmenistan's contribution to the fight against the Taliban, on the other hand, remained limited to the permission of the U.S. planes to fly over its territory on humanitarian grounds and to use the Ashgabat airport for refueling purposes.⁵⁴

The surge of the Taliban and ISIS-originated unrest on the Afghan border by 2014 complicated the security situation in Turkmenistan. The Taliban killed six Turkmen border guards and 27 Turkmen conscripts along the Afghan border in 2014 and 2016, respectively.⁵⁵ Moreover, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, ISIS's branch in Afghanistan, briefly captured the Darzab district in the

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Jowzjan Province of Afghanistan, which was territorially contiguous with Turkmenistan's Lebap Province. After these incidents, Ashgabat decided to develop its security cooperation with Moscow and Beijing. Turkmenistan purchased more weapons and military equipment from Russia and China, although

Türkiye transcended both countries in terms of total arms procurements.⁵⁶ Russia also provided training to Turkmen border guards.

Furthermore, Russia and Turkmenistan ratified a joint security cooperation agreement in October 2020 that was signed in April 2003 that encompassed cooperation in counteracting terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, money laundering, and smuggling.⁵⁷ In June 2021, shortly before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, China offered the expanded placement of private Chinese security company personnel to Turkmenistan that had already been deployed to protect Chinese-owned infrastructure in the country.⁵⁸ However, Turkmenistan preferred adhering to its neutral policy. Turkmenistan also had direct contact with the Taliban in October 2021 to ensure the security of infrastructure and economic projects between the two countries.⁵⁹

Small states that are in close geographic proximity to a great power may succumb to its demands more easily if they also benefit from economic collaboration with that country. This especially holds true for Kyrgyzstan and, to a lesser extent, for Tajikistan, as they seem to take into serious consideration the Chinese pleas regarding the extradition of Uighurs. Kyrgyzstan's exposure to additional security risks due to Tajik and Uzbek exclaves within its territory makes it more malleable to great power demands. The increasing security threats from neighboring Afghanistan complicate matters further for Tajikistan and consolidate its military bonds with China and Russia. Turkmenistan perceived less threat from Afghanistan and therefore sustained limited military cooperation with China and Russia until 2014. The increase of ISIS and Taliban-originated perils has augmented military collaboration with these states in terms of arms and equipment purchases and training. Yet, Ashgabat avoided any joint military operations or multilateral military drills that might infringe on its neutral foreign policy line.

Conclusion

The economic and security concerns proved to be decisive in formulating the foreign policy strategies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the post-indepen-

dence era. Kyrgyzstan's severe problems with its Uzbek minority, mounting radical Islamic currents on its territory, energy dependence, and close proximity to China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region led Bishkek to draw closer to Moscow. The outbreak of a deadly border skirmish near the Vorukh enclave that Tajikistan controlled in May 2021 and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 intensified Kyrgyzstan's worries regarding its security. Kyrgyzstan does not share a border with Afghanistan, yet, radical Islamic militants from Afghanistan infiltrated its borders during the previous Taliban period, and its border guards were incapable of dealing with even minor border incidents, which enhanced the significance of military ties with Russia. So although China tops Russia in terms of trade and investment figures, Russia remains Kyrgyzstan's major political and security partner. Moreover, economic bonds with Russia cannot be neglected as Kyrgyzstan is dependent on Russian energy supplies as well as remittances from this country.

The devastating impact of the five-year civil war, meager energy resources, its location near the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, and the perilous state of the border with Afghanistan prompted Tajikistan to gravitate toward Russia akin to Kyrgyzstan. Strengthening economic and security ties with China formed another significant dimension of Tajik foreign policy. The accession of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan was not well-received in Tajikistan either, as the Taliban was reluctant to include Tajiks, which made up nearly half of the country's population, in the new government. Furthermore, the Taliban's hosting of the Jemaat Ansarullah group, which is considered a terrorist organization by Tajikistan, is another potential source of tension between Kabul and Dushanbe. This development may push Tajikistan to seek more Russian help to strengthen its border protection mechanisms.

Turkmenistan's relative internal stability, rich natural gas resources, and quiet relations with Afghanistan allowed the country to follow a neutral foreign policy line. Ashgabat isolated itself from regional disputes and global matters and eschewed participating in multilateral organizations. However, the backfiring of the policy of diversification of gas exports in the early months of 2017 triggered serious economic difficulties in the country. On top of this, the deterioration of the security situation on the Afghan border pushed the country to bolster military ties with Russia and China. It seems that as long as Turkmenistan relies on a sole buyer for its gas exports, it will be quite challenging to retain its neutral foreign policy line. Cognizant of this situation, Ashgabat reached out to Kabul shortly after the Taliban recaptured Afghanistan to ensure the completion of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, which would reduce Ashgabat's dependence on the Chinese market.

The findings of the study substantiate the initial hypothesis. Small states with scarce material capacity that are trying to survive amid internal challenges

spurred by centrifugal currents and external risks created by formidable geography prefer aligning with great power, as proven by the growing political, economic, and security ties of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with Russia. As revealed in the case of Turkmenistan, natural resource endowment is a major advantage for a small power to sustain an independent and flexible foreign policy line as long as the country retains a diverse customer base and minimizes internal risks as external threats emanate from its immediate neighborhood. ■

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